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NEW
WORLDS 

PRESENT DANGER



edited by
eddie robson

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When the entire galaxy finds itself under attack from the Deindum – a highly advanced but aggressive and paranoid race from the future – Bernice Summerfield and her various friends and colleagues are scattered across space, doing what they can for the war effort.

Bernice makes her way home before heading back into history, searching for knowledge about their adversary and (hopefully) a weapon which might help the cause. Braxiatel, leading a coalition of civilised worlds against the attack, has cause to question his methods. An exhausted Bev runs the Braxiatel Collection as a refugee centre, fearful of an imminent attack. Adrian and Doggles must overcome their shared history and work together, whilst Hass embarks on a dangerous journey through the galaxy's war zones to the heart of the Deindum's new empire. But will it be enough? What can they do against one of the most daunting enemies they have ever faced?

Eddie Robson

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PRESENT DANGER

A short-story collection

BIG FINISH

For Gabriel and Jago

Contents

Prelude by Eddie Robson	5
Winging It by Lance Parkin	9
Don't Do Something, Just Sit There by Kate Orman	29
Six Impossible Things by Simon Guerrier	41
Interlude by Eddie Robson	53
The War of Art by Jason Arnopp	57
The Better Part of Valour by LM Myles	75
Digital Dreams by Oli Smith	89
Interlude by Eddie Robson	103
The Empire Variations by Niall Boyce	108
Past Caring by Richard Dinnick	115
The Propaganda War by John Dorney	127
In The Ledgers Of Madness by Mark Clapham	139
Interlude by Eddie Robson	163
Excalibur of Mars by Jim Smith	167
The End Times by Jonathan Blum	177
Epilogue by Eddie Robson	201
About the Authors	206

Prelude

Eddie Robson

War was not declared, it just happened. And it was no less than Bernice, Peter and Hass expected.

They watched the first reports come in from Maximediras along with everybody else on Earth – the home planet of Bernice's species, and somewhere Hass would have liked to visit under more relaxed circumstances. Bernice, her son and her friend were less confused than the people around them. It was debatable whether or not they were less afraid. When you don't understand what's happening, you tend to expect the worst that you can imagine: but most people probably couldn't imagine many of the things that these three had seen.

'I have to congratulate Doggles,' said Hass.

'Yes, indeed,' said Bernice. 'If we ever see him again.'

Doggles, their one-time colleague at the Braxiatel Collection, had extrapolated various possible futures based on how events here might have unfolded – events which now seemed a long time ago. Doggles had predicted that creatures would evolve who would not only possess a high level of time-travel technology, but who would also be aggressive and paranoid, and would most likely dominate large sections of the galaxy.

These creatures would recognise the possibility that somebody (like Doggles, for example) might predict this future and attempt to prevent it coming to pass, perhaps by wiping the creatures out before they evolved. Given this possibility, Doggles had said, it was highly likely that the creatures would attempt to come back and ensure it could never come to pass. Doggles had shown Bernice this extrapolation in his research facility on the Moon, and here she was watching something very like it unfold.

Hass was slightly relieved when footage of the attackers of Maximediras was finally released: a lot of humans (especially Earthbound ones) didn't know much about Yesodi and as long as the identity of the aggressors remained a mystery he was, along with many other aliens, often treated with suspicion and sometimes outright hostility from people frustrated at not knowing who to blame. Hass tried to be understanding about this, but he did sometimes feel like telling them about how his encounter suit protected those around him from the radiation his body naturally produced, and that if he really wanted to wage war on humanity, he could take it off any time he chose and murder everyone within a radius of several miles.

If he let the radiation build up, he could take out the population of a small planet. And to his shame, a few years ago he had done exactly that. Which was why he couldn't bring himself to make the threat, even as a bluff. So he just assured those who confronted him that his people had nothing to do with this and waited for the true enemy to be revealed.

Doggles had done fairly well in predicting what the creatures would look like. But this made it no less shocking when the first pictures of them came through.

Humanity's first glimpse of the Deindum showed them in their dozens, floating over the oceans of Maximediras. Giant heads detached from bodies, their skulls glowing unpleasantly through their flesh, encased in spheres augmented with technology, 'armed to the teeth' (as Bernice had joked without much conviction at the time) with weapons that shot flame. They were firing upon survivors of the Maximediras attack who had tried to escape across that planet's vast oceans. The survivors' ships had been destroyed. A few of the survivors remained in the water. They could evade the Deindum flames by ducking underneath the surface, but of course they eventually had to come back up for air.

If you could bear to watch the footage for any length of time (longer than Bernice allowed Peter to watch it), you realised that the Deindum were missing their targets on purpose, to prolong the sport. You would also notice that it was impossible for anyone other than the Deindum to have produced this footage.

Bernice, Hass and Peter felt it was their duty to collate what they knew into a dossier and send it to those in power, who appeared to be trying to work out what it all meant and what response was appropriate. They all contributed information, but Bernice did the actual writing, pointing out that she was quite good at this sort of thing. 'Clarity,' she said. 'I've read so many papers and interminable books that don't know the difference between a pertinent fact and something that's just kind of interesting that the author found out and was determined to mention.'

They'd tried to contact Doggles for further data, but received no reply. They wondered if he was still on the Moon.

Just as they were completing the dossier, however, a familiar face was splashed across the media: that of Irving Braxiatel, their former employer whose relentless manipulation and paranoia had managed to make an enemy of so many of his friends. It had lately become clear that Braxiatel had been fighting his own war with the Deindum for quite some time. He had been privately preserving the knowledge and culture of his beleaguered, dying people, with the aim of one day

resurrecting them. However, he had realised that the Deindum were destined to effectively replace them as the most advanced time-travelling civilisation in the universe. Deciding that even the entire universe wasn't big enough for both of them, and fearing a repeat of the conflict which was destroying his people at that moment, Braxiatel had embarked on a covert campaign to avert their creation, or at least alter their development. The Deindum, with their vast field of historical vision, had seen this coming and reached back into their past to frustrate Braxiatel's efforts.

The upshot of all this was that Braxiatel had failed, and in place of the peaceful and proactive Deindum who should have come into existence, he had altered the future and given rise to the creatures who had come back to attack them now.

For a man who was not accustomed to failure, this was failure on the most epic scale imaginable. As people who knew him fairly well, Bernice and Hass watched his broadcasts whilst looking for signs that his apparently-invincible self-confidence had suffered any kind of knock. They saw none. But given the situation, he was probably trying his hardest not to show it.

Braxiatel first appeared in front of the media in the same suit he'd worn when Hass had last seen him on Maximediras, just before Braxiatel had sent Hass to Earth. The suit was ragged, missing most of a sleeve, and Braxiatel himself was covered in cuts and bruises. He could easily have changed his clothes first, or applied healant to the wounds: but this would have negated the impact of his appearance.

Braxiatel was one of the few who had managed to escape from Maximediras, he said – paying tribute to a woman named Lianna Martin who had been crucial to his escape, but had been forced by circumstance to remain behind. Hass grumbled when her name was mentioned.

'What is it?' asked Peter.

'Nothing,' said Hass.

Braxiatel went on to describe the situation: that the enemy – the Deindum, as he named them for the first time – had established a base on Maximediras and intended to hold the planet. 'I know a little of these creatures,' he said. 'They are vicious and ruthless, they come from our future, and their technology is far in advance of our own. I don't know what they want here –'

Hass swore in his native language, incorrectly assuming that Peter wouldn't understand.

Peter laughed. 'You can say that again,' he said.

'You can, but I'd really rather you didn't,' said Bernice.

Braxiatel was explaining that the Deindum would not allow anything to get in their way, and named Earth as one of several likely

targets. 'Make no mistake: the Deindum are a clear and present danger to every civilisation in the galaxy. Do not think you can make a deal with them or join them as allies. You will regret it. They honour no pacts, because they trust nobody but themselves. I therefore call upon all civilisations to put aside their differences and come together against a common enemy greater than anything any of us have known. We can fight, but first it is essential that we unite. Thank you.'

'Blimey,' said Bernice as the coverage shifted to a panel of experts giving their views on what had just been said. 'For a second there I thought he was going to break into a rendition of "We Are The World".'

'He made this mess,' Hass said. 'Let's hope he can get us out of it.'

They sent the dossier anyway, hoping it didn't get lost in amongst the nonsense that invariably flooded into government departments from well-intentioned crackpots in times of crisis. They reluctantly refrained from mentioning Braxiatel's culpability in the situation. He had presented himself as the rallying figure and as the attacks he'd predicted started to occur, the larger empires and federations started to throw their lot in with him. Undermining him at this stage would, unfortunately, have been a disaster. Then, the three of them parted ways. They weren't alone in trying to get off Earth: as soon as Braxiatel had mentioned it as a potential target, the clamour to leave had begun. As an alien Hass was able to claim repatriation, whilst Peter had dual specieshood and Bernice's official residence was still the Braxiatel Collection. The war was bound to swallow up resources and the fewer people who were consuming them, the better: so they had no trouble securing passage off-world.

'Where will you go?' Hass asked them. 'To find Braxiatel?'

Bernice grimaced and shivered. 'I'm sure he's forging a grand and irritatingly complex plan to resolve the situation, but he can find another mug to help carry it out. Peter and I will head back to the Collection – I doubt he'll be there, and if he is then I'll give him a piece of my mind. But other than that, my plan is to use this.' She held up her left hand and waggled the finger on which her time ring rested.

'You need to go back to the Collection to use it?'

'I think so. It's low on power – if I used it now, I'm not sure I could get back again. I can recharge it at the Collection. So you're not coming back with us?'

'No,' said Hass. 'I'm going to Maximediras.'

Bernice's eyes widened. 'So they can chuck you in the prison camp?'

'Yes,' said Hass. 'Firstly, there's someone there I'd like to find.'

'If they're still alive.'

'Yes, if they're still alive. And secondly... I think it's the place where

I could do the most good.'

Winging It

Lance Parkin

How do you win a fight with an enemy from the future? That's the problem facing Irving Braxiatel.

He has found himself at war with the Deindum, a race even he, with all the vast knowledge and resources at his disposal, barely knows. He knew a great deal about them once, but that was before the timeline changed and made all that knowledge redundant. The only things that have not changed are the identity of their home planet (an unremarkable chunk of rock which, for the sake of convenience, has now been dubbed Deindus), and a level of mastery over time travel almost unparalleled in the history of the universe. The latter fact is what has brought them from the distant future and onto Braxiatel's metaphorical doorstep. Braxiatel does not know when they come from, precisely. All he knows is that they come.

He does understand that some things never change. Human warriors of the twenty-seventh century (the era he is now living through) still read and learn from the military strategists of their Bronze Age. All the warrior races in the universe that Braxiatel knows of have vast libraries of literature which boil down to a few simple, common rules. In virtually any battle having the high ground places you at an advantage. Communication lines and supply lines are as important as the front lines – and as important to your opponent.

Know your enemy. That's always the key. It's naïve to say it's enough. A hill tribe with wood spears might know their enemy has atomic weapons and is about to drop them; the knowledge would do little to help. It's a truism, though, that if you don't know your enemy – why they fight, how they fight, what they fight with, what they value – then you have no hope of beating them. If you don't know them, how will you know when you've won?

More to the point, the Deindum know him. To them, Irving Braxiatel is an historical figure, the events of his life a fully-mapped sequence, a closed book. Braxiatel realises that this is a big, old universe and that he is, ultimately, very small. These things are relative, however, and Braxiatel has, until now, always had a healthy regard for his own importance. He knows that he has already made more of a mark in the history books than most individuals – than some civilisations, in fact.

So the Deindum know what happened. They already know they brought the fight to him and if they did that, they must also know for

a cast-iron fact that they won. The future is the ultimate high ground, and if they read a passage in a history book they didn't like, they could most certainly use time travel to go back and redraft it until they did like it. What will happen soon is a mystery to Irving Braxiatel and a simple matter of record to the Deindum.

It's not difficult to conclude that his enemy have an insurmountable advantage. The logic of language, in fact, dictates that they'd had an unsurmounted advantage.

'Unsurmounted' was not a word in Braxiatel's dictionary. Or, he reflected, in anyone else's.

It was a beautiful summer's morning, the birds were singing and flapping and playing around him. Braxiatel took out his pen, an antique, and a paper notepad. He had no idea how to win this fight, but began jotting down some ideas.

'I don't understand what this is,' Prillif told Jerai, numberless millions of years later.

Would the Deindum recognise the grumbling tone of his voice? Even after years of working together, Prillif had no idea. He had no doubt that Jerai had the ability to detect nuances in the way Schlangi communicated that even Prillif was unaware of, but in practice the Deindum never seemed interested enough in anything but themselves.

The Schlangi's claw tapped against the display, one of the images of the Capra Marbles. Jerai would recognise it at a glance as Image one-hexagon-blade-two. A full-length representation of an assault ship. They both knew every detail of that image, and Jerai could guess what the problem was.

'The wing,' he said.

'The wing,' Prillif confirmed.

In former times, before they had been moved to Shipyard, the Marbles had adorned the Temple of Never Forgetting on Capra. A three-hundred-metre frieze, laser-carved onto imported Kalkravian Marble.

Most of the surface area was taken up with symbols – characters in one of the human languages. The only recognisable sentence was at the end, and it was illogical to the point of gibberish: *Recognize Their Sacrifice As Your Own*. Most academics agreed that there was probably an error in the standard translation.

Before that epitaph was a string of nearly ten million words, many of which didn't appear in any of the old Human language dictionaries; with little or no grammatical structure; no punctuation; very little in the way of a linguistic matrix. It was laid out in sets of typically two or three words. Apart from a few recurring prefixes and suffixes in many of the words, the only notable pattern was that the last word of

each set was occasionally repeated as the last word of the next, and the first letters of the last words of each set ran alphabetically.

So: the first set was Angelina Johnson Abrams, the second was Branston Abrams, the last was Vincent Zolk. There were something like four and a half million sets of words like that.

The scholarly consensus was that the symbols were poetry or musical notation, in some odd alliterative form. Shorter pieces like it had been found carved on many ruins of human settlements. There had been attempts to reconstruct the work, even performances where sections had been read or sung. None were compelling.

The writing was of no interest to the Deindum. The pictures most certainly were.

Above each of the hundred sections was a carved image and these built up to be a complete visual account of the Battle of Capra. It began with a handy star-chart giving the exact space-time coordinates. What followed was an extremely detailed depiction of the fighting – the human faces seemed to be of individuals, rather than stylised or generalised. The fashions, human equipment, vehicles and weaponry gave vital clues to the level of technology and manufacturing techniques they used.

The humans had been fighting the Deindum.

Prillif knew the story very well, because Jerai and the handful of other Deindum he dealt with often settled arguments by invoking it: It's on the Marbles.

A Deindum expedition to the lifeless, rocky world of Capra had discovered the Marbles over four hundred years ago. They'd quickly understood that these images were not a coincidence, artistic licence or some Deindum-like race. This was a depiction of a Deindum assault force. As the Deindum had barely begun to evolve at the time the battle was fought, the Deindum fighting the battle must be time-travellers.

This was a memorial for a battle that the Deindum had won in the distant past, but were yet to fight. Discovering such things was inherent in the nature of time travel, but was always disconcerting.

The story the Marbles told was that Capra had been a crucial planet for the human Empire, a key communications and supply station. It was heavily defended. The Marbles showed a Deindum armada outwarping suddenly, the humans quickly rallying and fighting fiercely. For all their bravery, it was a one-sided battle. The Deindum prevailed, with minimal losses. Many humans died. The Deindum fleet had remained in the past, carved its way through human territory. The Battle of Capra was the one crucial turning point in human affairs, most commentators concluded, the beginning of the end.

Why would the Deindum attack?

This question troubled the scholars of most planets. Prillif assumed it troubled the Deindum themselves, although they'd never let on. Everyone agreed that the Deindum must have been provoked in some way, but given that their species hadn't evolved by the end of the Era of Humans, it was hard to see what the justification for the act of war could possibly be. The human race could frequently be aggressive, according to the histories, but this was pushing it even by their standards.

To launch an armada through time was possible for a race in the Deindum league, but even for them it was a huge undertaking, would take vast amounts of every type of resource: time, energy, manpower, research, raw materials.

Yet it would happen – it *had* happened. It was written in stone. *It's on the Marbles.*

Studying the Battle of Capra had become a distinct discipline among Deindum thinkers, and because of the influence the Deindum wielded, this soon set a pattern for the galaxy's academia. This was one of very few subjects where the Deindum bothered looking at other peoples' research – and, more to the point, they were very generous with their grants if you came up with an insight they hadn't.

'The wing,' Jerai repeated.

They looked at the detail in question, a giant spreading shape, like one vulture's wing, but mounted to the top of the ship, so it looked like a jagged sail or a lopsided shark's fin.

'We just have no idea what that is,' Prillif confessed. 'Even what it might be. What does the literature say?'

'You have studied the literature,' Jerai reminded him.

'The public records, yes. Is there nothing in the Deindum archive?'

'No.' Admitting his ignorance clearly rattled Jerai.

They spent a few minutes going through the other images of the ships together – they both knew the Marbles well enough to do this without using the index. There were nine images in total showing the ships, together they displayed the ships from virtually every angle. Right at the start of the project, they'd made holographic composites of the pictures. They called those up now, ghostly three-dimensional models.

'A cooling element?' Jerai asked.

Prillif shook his head. 'I don't see what it would be cooling. It serves no aerodynamic function. Rather the opposite, in point of fact. It might be a communications array.'

'Might it be a weapon?'

Prillif shrugged. 'It isn't depicted as such anywhere. No energy bolts coming off it or anything of that sort. Whatever it is, it moves – flaps

like a bird's wing, judging from these images. I admit I don't know Deindum tastes. Might it be decorative?'

'I do not find it aesthetically pleasing, I can't think of anyone that would. Might it strike fear into the humans?'

'Panel eight-circle-tip-one has humans looking scared and in the same image one of the ships appears. I know human psychology is opaque at the best of times, but this is the image where they – where you – drop the quarkonic bombs, and I suspect they'd be more scared of that than the wing thing.'

'The only important question is whether you can reproduce this feature.'

'With some effort. There's enough detail to show it has some sort of hydraulic mechanism, not enough to solve all the design issues.' Prillif hesitated before suggesting, 'We could leave it off the design.'

Jerai glared at him. 'No.'

'But...'

'This decision has already been made,' Jerai said, pointing at the image.

'This is how the ships will look.'

'I understand,' said Prillif, his head down.

'The design is the design.'

'It's on the Marbles.'

'Precisely. This is how it happened. This is how it must happen.'

'I understand,' Prillif said again.

'Your job is simple: you are to recreate the vessels shown in these images. No more, no less.'

'Yes, sir. I do understand.'

Four years later, Prillif was propped in a chair in his office, studying the new plans. He was tired, with an ache in both spines.

Awards and other accolades decorated the walls. In one corner stood a great display case with small, physical models of his most acclaimed work. Prillif glanced their way from time to time and invariably sighed. None of those clients ever needed a giant useless ugly stupid vulture wing stuck to the top of their ship.

He always liked to work with paper and plastic models, as well as holograms. The starships he designed and oversaw to construction had a physical reality. These Deindum ships would be several miles long and contain thousands of ground troops. Reality was rarely more physical than that.

Prillif and his team finally had a working wing. He was sure of that, now. It would flap. He checked the time – it was the middle of the night. Well, out here at Shipyard it was always the middle of the night, just as it was always the middle of the working day. It

depended which of the four shifts you were on. It was the middle of Prillif's night, and Jerai kept the same cycle. Prillif thought about contacting Jerai. He wasn't sure if he'd be waking him, if Deindum ever slept or rested.

The prospect of not waking Jerai up annoyed Prillif. He wanted to inconvenience his client. Not a noble sentiment, but after four years working on this one problem, losing sleep and hurting his back and not winning awards, he wasn't feeling noble.

Something nagged at Prillif.

He checked the model of the wing, checked the new blueprints. It wasn't quite right. The alignment of the vanes, the shape of the mounting. He couldn't see the problem, but he knew it was there.

Prillif screwed his eyes shut, opened them again.

This was the twentieth draft of the plans.

It would need at least one more draft. The Deindum would wait until the wing was exactly as shown in the Capra Marbles.

How strange, Prillif thought, to have no deadline. Of all the many strangenesses and challenges this job held, that was oddest. The money kept coming, more of it than any other client would pay him. He'd joked once to Jerai that he might die of old age here at Shipyard and the Deindum had told him not to worry, they'd make him immortal if it proved necessary.

The armada would launch when it was ready.

From the moment the Deindum discovered the Marbles, they'd seen that the design of the ships was broadly recognisable. Their time ships weren't from some unknowable future epoch. The details of the ships and the Deindum clothing were unusual, but mostly represented changes in style rather than manufacturing or philosophy.

Just as the humans depicted in the sculptures were clearly individual people who their contemporaries would have been able to identify, there were images of specific Deindum. Individuals unborn at the time the Marbles were discovered.

Jerai was there, on panel nine-octagon-blade-one. What had started as classroom jokes – hey, that one in panel-one-triangle-blade-four looks like Mikoa! That one in panel nine-triangle-hilt-four is ugly enough to be Orach! – quickly became a pattern. As Jerai's graduating class had grown to adulthood, they had grown to resemble young versions of these military leaders.

They were the generation that would fight this battle, the moment of destiny was at hand.

Plans to build the armada, already well advanced, were accelerated. Shipyard was constructed deep in the resource-rich Shoal at the edge of the galaxy. An industrial complex larger than most solar systems, a

hundred planet-sized factory stations, linked by gray columns, powered by tiny artificial stars, fed by thousands of robot mining ships.

Every individual depicted in the Marbles had been identified and drafted. They were intensively trained in all the military arts, in history, in time theory. They were, it turned out, the best and brightest of their generation. Natural leaders, scholars and warriors. Had any other race produced just one such individual, they would have been lauded as a hero, led nations, gone into legend. These were the sort who had constellations named after them.

Prillif was looking at the image of Jerai now. Nine-octagon-blade-one.

He had no idea how Deindum aged. This didn't quite look like the Jerai he knew. Like the wing, there were trifling differences, ones right at the limit of perception.

The door to the office whooshed open and Jerai stepped into the room. Prillif leapt from the chair, found himself standing to attention and hating himself for it.

'You have solved the wing?' Jerai asked.

There was no way this news could have been communicated to the Deindum, not without the sort of long-range mind-reading that everyone always said was impossible. Jerai did not look like he'd been roused from sleep to come here, his tone of voice was matter-of-fact, not accusatory or excited.

'I don't think so,' Prillif confessed.

Was that a hint of impatience in Jerai's expression? If so, it would be a first.

'We get there,' Prillif said hurriedly, 'we get there in the end. We know that. It's in the Marbles. It just isn't here, not quite yet.'

It was going to click. One day it was just going to be there, like a picture coming into focus.

'It is hard not to feel complacent,' Jerai said.

Prillif blinked. Was Jerai criticising him, or was this a Deindum actually admitting his emotional state to an alien?

'When I was identified, I felt proud. Powerful. I knew I would win. That I would be immortalised, not be merely immortal.'

Prillif opened his mouth, but thought better of saying anything.

'At times, I saw it as freeing,' Jerai confessed. 'We won. At other times, I saw it as constrictive. We won, there is no escaping that, and however glorious the destiny, that feels like a cage. It's on the Marbles.'

'Sir... I stress that this is a thought experiment, but... what if some things weren't quite as the Marbles depict them?'

Jerai looked at him in a way Prillif couldn't decipher, so he chose to

see that as a prompt to go on.

‘If you attack with just as many warships, with just as many bombs, just as many soldiers but, say, yes, this collar here... just say this collar was squared off, not pointed. Would that really prevent you winning the Battle of Capra?’

Jerai considered his answer for a moment.

‘It might,’ he said.

‘How?’

‘It might.’

‘History isn’t written in stone –’ Prillif glanced back at the Marbles. ‘All right, a bad figure of speech. You are saying that it’s possible you could go back there with a square collar?’

‘Yes. I have free will. I could choose to wear something with a square collar.’

‘Even though you didn’t?’

‘Even though I didn’t.’

‘This makes sense to you?’

‘Time theory allows for this. History would change. Panel nine-octagon-blade-one would change.’

‘The result of the Battle wouldn’t change because you had a different collar.’

‘The result of the Battle might change.’

‘How?’

‘That does not matter.’

‘Of course it matters! Can you see any way that it could affect the outcome?’

‘No... but the *possibility* would exist of defeat. If everything is as depicted, defeat is impossible. You are right to be concerned, you are right to note the importance of what seem trivial details.’

‘You know you will win the battle?’

‘If *everything* is as it should be.’ Jerai considered a simile a Schlangi might understand, reached back a little too far. ‘A different arrangement of clockwork might tell you the correct time, the correct clockwork can only do so.’

Prillif sat back.

‘You see it now?’ Jerai said.

‘Yes. All this time working here, I saw your victory as inevitable. It happened, millennia before we were even born. The fleet had to launch, obviously, but once that was done...’

‘It is like a scientific experiment,’ Jerai said. ‘Great care must be taken to get the conditions exactly right, the measurements must be precise. Only then will it work as modelled.’

The shubble had no obvious means of propulsion, no obvious

guidance system, no obvious bulkheads.

Prillif looked out from it and down at the flagship as it drifted past. A blanket of enhanced reality overlaid the actual ship, matching it to the blueprints back in his office, highlighting any discrepancies. They marked out the incomplete areas. They opened the ship up for him, so he saw it in cross-section. In every part of the vessel, crews worked under Deindum supervision, installing modules of their technology, fitting it with the more conventional systems. The time core was laid in now. It sat throbbing at the heart of the ship, creating ripples in spacetime.

After twenty years, the hull was nearly complete. Beyond the flagship were the other ships, all of them in advanced stages of construction. Some would be completed soon.

Jerai appeared next to him. The Deindum looked almost exactly as he had when Prillif had first met him.

‘Events have started to fall into place,’ Jerai said, without greeting him. ‘There are glimmers of activity in the twenty-seventh century, old Earth reckoning.’

‘The century the Marbles were carved.’

‘Indeed. We have transpirations: temporal chatter indicating events are coalescing that threaten the security of the Deindum. Some of our theorists believe our timeline has already been altered, in ways that are now lost in the vagaries of causality.’

‘Good grief.’

‘This is the gravest threat we have ever faced.’ Jerai sounded slightly excited: this was the threat it was his destiny to avert. The possibility had always existed that, despite its dramatic depiction in the Marbles, the mission itself would be quite mundane: the Deindum were no strangers to using excessive force. ‘We have names of individuals in that era who are implicated: Braxiatel, Hass, Ward, Summerfield.’

‘Summerfield... Braxiatel,’ Prillif said, turning the sounds over in his mouth.

‘Both words appear on the Marbles.’

‘Yes. There’s more than that, though. Those names are familiar to me.’

‘You have heard of the Braxiatel Collection?’

‘Yes, yes, of course. The greatest collection of art in the history of the galaxy. Well, definitely in the top three. And it’s Bernice Summerfield, isn’t it?’

‘It is.’

‘The Bernice Summerfield.’

‘We are fighting legends.’

‘Well, Jerai, so are they. And we know how it turns out. Good.’

‘We have cunning opponents. We cannot be complacent. They will attempt to disrupt our work here. History can be changed. Our first order of business is to send a squadron to defend the homeworld in the past and avert any attempt to wipe us out whilst our ancestors are still developing.’

‘You’ll have to stand guard over it until your ancestors can look after themselves. That means staying put for millions of years.’

‘That is what we intend to do. The evidence of the more recent past suggests it is what we have already done.’

‘Do your enemies have time-travel capability?’

‘There are time-travellers among their forces, yes. We are working to neutralise them.’

‘Diverting resources from the armada?’

‘The armada remains the focus of our efforts.’

‘Good, good. You prevail, Jerai. Do not forget that.’

Jerai looked at him. ‘You do not look well.’

Prillif turned, didn’t try to hide his surprise. ‘I’m old, Jerai.’

‘You have turned down our offer of–’

‘Those of us who are not Deindum get old. It is... written.’

Jerai reached out a hand made of liquid mechanics, touched Prillif’s shoulder, said nothing.

Some time after that, Jerai let slip that the Deindum had acquired a small notebook that had belonged to Irving Braxiatel. The word ‘Capra?’ was written on one page. There were sketches of birds on another page. Both were thought to be in Irving Braxiatel’s own hand. The rest of the book was blank, no pages were missing.

The saboteurs struck, and struck hard.

Prillif was thrown from his berth one morning, slapped into the hard floor, broke bones in his nose and at least one of his eyes, seriously bruised an arm.

Alarms and sirens sounded. It felt like an earthquake, but that was impossible: this place only resembled a planet, it was an entirely artificial space station. The deck was rocking beneath him. This was impossible.

Perhaps it wasn’t the deck, perhaps it was him. This was his decrepit body giving out on him.

The old Schlangi struggled to his feet, found a screen, clawed at the controls.

There were no reports, yet, just the raw data. One of the other factory planets had been destroyed. Vast forces had been unleashed, ripped through it, torn it into pieces and those pieces had then shot out like shrapnel at hypersonic speeds, only an impact with another object would slow them down.

Prillif was an engineer, and he couldn't help but picture the damage. The lost planet was a long way away. For him to have felt the blast like that must mean that around thirty percent of Shipyard would be affected, that vast numbers of protective force fields had failed. Thousands must have died, hundreds of thousands. The fragments entering the gray columns would be sucked along at huge speeds, they'd fill the whole travel network with bullets. Travel outside the tubes would also be restricted while they cleared space.

He would later learn that his estimate was right: a third of the ships had suffered serious damage. Ten had been lost. Ninety thousand workers killed, ten times as many seriously wounded, virtually everyone in the whole of Shipyard had sustained at least a minor injury.

Three Deindum had been killed.

Deindum didn't die. It was the only thing most people in the galaxy knew about them. Prillif reflected on the possibility that maybe they just wanted people to think it was impossible to kill them.

Jerai surfaced later in the day, visiting Prillif in the infirmary, something the Schlangi appreciated. The Deindum was agitated.

'It was an assassination attempt,' Jerai said. 'A booby trap in an old book. A singularity bomb. The book had been in our collection for just a short time, it was that old notebook of Irving Braxiatel's. It was triggered when we timescanned it.'

Prillif was an engineer, so his first reaction was one of awe – to create such a thing, let alone smuggle it into a book, designing it to remain dormant for thousands of millennia. He struggled to imagine how they'd done it.

'The Deindum who were lost,' Prillif said, 'were they depicted on the Marbles?'

Jerai shook his head.

'That is something.'

If just one of those Deindum had been lost, or even lost a limb or an eye, then the Marbles would be rendered null and void, the whole project here rendered invalid.

'How did they know?' Prillif asked. 'How could they have steered the notebook here?'

'Do not imagine that because our enemies are from the distant past, that means they are primitive. We have sent small missions to their timezone. They are powerful, and surprisingly resourceful.'

'You've suffered setbacks in their timezone?'

The Deindum said nothing, apparently angry he'd given away as much as he had.

'They lose the Battle of Capra,' Prillif reminded him. 'You will prevail.'

‘Following the events of today,’ Jerai said, ‘we must prevail. Work must resume as soon as possible. This was their attack. It failed.’

Prillif couldn’t be so sure. ‘It will take months to replace those workers, years to clear the debris.’

‘Then it will take years,’ Jerai told him.

Somewhat to Prillif’s surprise, he lived to see the fleet launched.

Jerai didn’t come to say goodbye. It was over a year since they’d last spoken. The Deindum had been busy, security had been tightened.

There had been no ceremony. The launch wasn’t a surprise, or a sudden event or anything like it, but in the end, the hour of the fleet’s departure had been set, the final preparations made, and then the ships moved into formation and then they inwarped and were gone.

Prillif had seen all this from an observation bubble. Several dozen of the senior subcontractors were there, determined to make the most of the moment. There were also a handful of the Deindum, who literally frowned on Prillif and his colleagues as they celebrated. Most of the workers had already left.

He found that he missed Jerai. A natural reaction. The Deindum had been a part of his life for decades.

‘What will happen to Shipyard now?’ Prillif asked one of the Deindum who’d remained behind. It looked down at him disdainfully, didn’t answer.

‘It would be a pity to waste all this,’ Prillif insisted. ‘A shame to abandon it. You have a lot of skilled workers here. A lot of expertise. Reseed some of the suns, and this place could run for a long time. Centuries.’

The Deindum gave what might have been a polite nod.

‘I’m not angling for work,’ Prillif said. ‘I’m well past retirement age and it’s not like I need the money, not now. But this place is miraculous. It could be a resource for the whole galaxy.’

This time the Deindum didn’t react.

‘I have another request,’ Prillif said. He knew there was no point waiting for a response. ‘It’s odd to think I’ll never see Jerai again. I would like to have a copy of Capra Marbles panel nine-octagon-blade-one. As a souvenir.’

‘Take the original,’ the Deindum said. He had a high, fluting voice. ‘You’re sure?’ Prillif asked.

‘It has no value now,’ the Deindum told him.

‘Thank you.’

The other Deindum were already leaving. This one turned and left, without another word.

It was the last Prillif saw of any of them. He packed his few possessions – his awards, the Marble panel. Robots loaded them

aboard the automated ship that took him back home.

He arrived to a day or so's acclaim, retired to a place in the mountains, near his family's ancestral nests. There were only distant relatives alive, now. No matter, he always felt much more comfortable alone. He was so used to living in outer space that he preferred the night's sky to that of the day, and quickly became practically nocturnal. He never got any word of what the Deindum did with Shipyard.

The Deindum fleet outwarped above Capra in perfect formation.

Jerai stood on the control disc of the third ship. He fingered his pointed collar nervously, then snatched his hand away, acutely aware that his hands were down at his sides on nine-octagon-blade-one.

A holographic image of panel one-circle-tip-one was overlaid with a holographic image of the fleet. It looked perfect.

'Correlation?' he asked.

'100%,' a voice boomed.

'Systems check?'

Jerai was playing his role, he thought, like an actor reading a script.

In the other ships, the other Deindum would be doing the same. Mikoa, Orach, Javorn, Qualshada. All of them.

'All systems correlate.'

'Move to configuration one-cone-tip-two.'

Every ship in the fleet began adjusting its position, taking up courses that would place them in precisely the pattern they took in the second image.

'Wing to configuration two,' Jerai shouted. For some reason that hadn't happened automatically. Now he heard the ceiling creak and strain as the wing above him gave a half-flap and fell into the appointed shape.

'Ready the ground troops,' a voice echoed around him.

Displays surrounded Jerai. One confirmed that the fleet was now in the second position, another showed the tens of thousands of soldiers readying themselves.

'Fleet aligned for Capra descent spiral. Commit.'

The entire warfleet powered towards the planet.

Something was wrong.

The fleet hit the third position perfectly, then the fourth, then the fifth.

The Deindum were playing their part to perfect, getting every line word perfect, hitting their marks.

Something was wrong.

'Scan the planet,' Jerai said.

'Such behaviour deviates from the Marbles,' his computer informed

him.

‘It’s not depicted in the Marbles,’ Jerai shot back. ‘That is not the same thing. Continue to sixth configuration, but also scan the planet.’

Sensors fired up, took in the whole of Capra in a moment.

‘Scan complete,’ Jerai was told. ‘Anomalies detected.’

‘Anomalies?’

‘There are deviations from the Marbles.’

‘No!’

Had the act of scanning the planet been the deviation? Jerai felt terror, for the very first time in his life. When saboteurs had hit the factory planet, all those years ago, he’d felt defiant. When he’d seen his own face on the Marbles he’d felt a sense of honour and privilege. Now he felt scared and alone.

‘Capra reading: zero lifeforms.’

‘What?’ Jerai said.

The screens were filling with images of Capra extrapolated from the images on the Marbles. A bustling city-world, with vast communications arrays towering over the skyscrapers filled with the workers that serviced them. A population of four million humans, countless artificials.

The world below them was rocky, barren.

‘Check the co-ordinates,’ Jerai ordered.

They’d arrived in the wrong place, or the wrong time.

A stupid mistake, a terrible one. Unforgiveable.

Even as he thought that, Jerai understood that this needn’t mean the mission had failed. They’d performed their perfect manoeuvres over the wrong planet... well, they’d relaunch, do it all again in the right place.

History didn’t record this sort of thing.

Jerai allowed himself to smile. This had been a mistake, but not one that his section was responsible for. Heads would roll, but not his head.

‘Miscalculation in the time vectors,’ he said. ‘Prepare a recalculation.’

‘Time vector confirmation check complete, co-ordinates match panel one-circle-tip-one. This is Capra. Astronomical crosscheck complete. This is Capra. Cepheid triangulation complete. This is Capra.’

Throughout the fleet, the other Deindum officers would be performing the same checks, coming to the same conclusion.

Jerai tried to think past that. If this was the right place, perhaps the true surface of Capra was being disguised. This was an important place, one that was bound to be protected. It would be camouflaged from space – it wouldn’t even have to be advanced technology. Simple tricks could be employed to make the world below seem entirely

innocent.

Jerai moved to scan more thoroughly, but stopped himself. No... another officer would be checking that. He needed to do something none of the others would do.

‘Confirm zero lifeforms.’

‘One lifeform has just materialised on the planet’s surface,’ the computer told him.

Jerai was the only one to have seen this, the others were too busy discussing the Marbles and the plan.

‘Analyse the lifeform on the planet below,’ he said.

‘Identification confirmed: Irving Braxiatel.’

‘Proceed with the attack as planned,’ a booming voice ordered.

There were no targets. Jerai saw the absurdity of the order, but could think of no better way to proceed. This would take them to Braxiatel, at any rate.

They swooped in, just as panel seven-pentagon-tip-one said they ought to, descending to where the Marbles told them the main population centre had been.

The world looked just as it did in their time. Lifeless, rocky.

Archaeologists in the era of the Deindum had combed this world, but never found anything. The annihilation, they had announced, had been totally perfect. Now the Deindum were here, though, there were no signs of any buildings. There were no towers to topple, nothing that could fall to ruin.

Braxiatel stood on the top of a cliff face, quite alone. He wore a smart business suit. In his hand was a small silver box. There was a camera next to him. There were cameras all over this part of the planet, as well as surveillance satellites in orbit.

The entire Deindum fleet screamed into the atmosphere, the shock waves kicking up the thin dust around him.

There was a very large chance he would be dead, and very soon.

His throat was dry. He was scared. Of all the things to be, he was scared. The ships were getting closer and closer. He still couldn’t see if they...

... Braxiatel grinned.

The ships all had a single wing, like a vulture’s wing, mounted to the top. Braxiatel watched as the wing on each ship started to flap, for no reason other than it could.

Braxiatel actually laughed out loud.

His plan had worked.

Now, all he had to do was work out what that plan was going to be.

All around him, the cameras began taking images of the Deindum fleet, uploading them to the datanet, which squirted the information

across the galaxy.

Tiny spybots whizzed around the Deindum ships, capturing photographs of the Deindum commanders through the viewports. Each one was becoming part of Braxiatel's story.

'Once upon a time, the Deindum came for me,' Braxiatel said, still unsure what the next line of this story was, nervous he was about to find out.

'Prepare to retreat!' Jerai shouted. 'All ships! Withdraw! Withdraw!'

'That is not how it happened,' one of the subhistorians on another ship complained.

'We've been tricked!' Jerai shouted.

'There's only one lifeform down there.'

'We must proceed as planned,' another voice – Qualshada's? – called.

'The lack of a human settlement is a mere detail.'

'Braxiatel is here,' Jerai insisted. 'This is not coincidence, it's not on the Marbles and it's most definitely not good news.'

A tiny white pinpoint appeared in the sky, became a perfect white line ten miles long.

'Singularity bomb detected,' the computer informed an empty command deck.

A perfect white line had been drawn across the blue sky. Now it whipped around, sweeping up the entire Deindum fleet, then curled up into a perfect white globe which grew ever smaller until it was a tiny white pinpoint again, and then it was nothing.

Braxiatel rocked back on his feet, hardly daring to believe he'd done it. A lesser man might have felt it was cheating, or at the least that the victory should come at the end of the great effort, not before. Not him.

He'd won.

He'd won.

He'd bloody well gone and won.

The air swirled and parted and a Deindum was there, towering over him.

The camera to Braxiatel's left took picture after picture of the creature with the pointed collar.

It looked to be over a foot taller than Braxiatel, but that might have been the angle, or perhaps the armour. It was carrying what looked for all the world like a sword. It swung the blade at the camera, destroying it. It swung for Braxiatel, but he'd scurried out of the way.

'Hello there!' he called to the Deindum.

His opponent was glaring at him.

'One of you escaped, eh?'

The sword flashed down. Braxiatel dodged it, but lost his footing,

tripped over and fell on his front. He rolled onto his back, ready to get up, but the sword point was at his throat.

The Deindum stood there.

‘How?’ it asked finally.

‘How do you win a battle with an enemy from the future?’ Braxiatel asked.

‘Well, I was hoping you’d be able to tell me that. How did I manage it?’

The Deindum watched him, carefully. ‘Explain how you did it, Braxiatel.’

‘You know my name?’

‘We know *we won*. It was on the Capra Marbles.’

‘The what?’

‘They haven’t been carved yet. They are the memorial of the great battle fought here this day. The day the forces of humanity rallied, but could not withstand the might of the Deindum armada!’

Braxiatel blinked.

‘EXPLAIN!’ the Deidum roared.

‘You know who I am?’

‘Yes.’

‘Tell me.’

‘You are Irving Braxiatel, founder of the Braxiatel Collection.’

‘Guilty as charged,’ he said, giving his most charming smile.

‘I am Jerai Sando Yahjerra Eltran Blade One,’ the Deindum shouted. ‘I am a soldier, I am an athlete, I am a scientist, I am a maker, I am a scholar, I am a king, I am a pioneer, I am a philosopher, I am a genius, I am a champion of all those things. I don’t know who your people are, but I know that the gods of your gods would worship us if only they dared to. And I was one of a host that was a hundred thousand strong. You are some piece-of-turd art historian, a complete tosser. How *dare* you beat us?’

Jerai raised his sword.

Braxiatel smiled. ‘You want to know how?’

Jerai hesitated, then positioned himself to deliver the deathblow. ‘You said you didn’t know,’ he pointed out.

Braxiatel found he was flinching, but managed to speak. ‘Well... let’s work it out together.’

Jerai watched him carefully, sword held high above his head, no sign that he was troubled by its weight. ‘I’ll work it out without you.’

‘No need. So, yes, as you say I’m an art historian,’ Braxiatel said. ‘I’m extremely rich, extremely well connected in the art world. I admit I don’t really see how that would help me defeat your warfleet. So... let’s think. As a historian, I know history is written by the winning side... but if your enemy comes from the future, you don’t want to tell

them how you won before the battle even starts. In that case, the cleverest thing the winner could do... is write that he lost.'

The Deindum had already caught his meaning.

'You faked it all.'

'Well, I haven't yet, but I must do. Yes. Don't you see? I won the Battle of Capra, so I will write the history – or rather I'll employ a ghostwriter, I'm a very busy man, you see. I'll hire teams of sculptors to make memorials. Memorials for a battle that was never really fought, with names of victims who were never even here. What did you say they were? Marbles? I'm not sure I know anyone who works with marble... Oh, wait, yes. I can think of just the man. So... the Marbles? Good are they?'

'Yours is a posthumous victory.'

But Jerai didn't strike.

'What is it?'

Jerai flexed his arm, but didn't strike.

'Something on your mind?'

'The wing. What was the point of the wing?'

Braxiatel started smiling again. 'Ah... I do know what the wing's for.' He fell silent.

'What?' Jerai insisted.

'Oh, it was nothing.'

'Tell me.'

'No, no. You go ahead and kill me. What did you say? You'll work it out without me.'

'I never could,' Jerai confessed. 'We spent decades trying to fathom it. I know that if I kill you now, I will never know what that damn wing was. So you're going to tell me.'

'I *did* tell you,' Braxiatel informed him, 'it was nothing.'

'It must have meant something. It must have some significance.'

'No.'

'What?'

'I wanted to get as many Deindum as possible in one place, detonate my singularity bomb. So I picked a time and place. Here, now. How to lure you here? Well, that's what I came out here to work out. I was just conducting a little survey of the place, I was going to test the bomb. And you know, it just that second crossed my mind that I might be able to lure you back to this very day, and then I'd know whether it worked... then you appeared. But you might have been lured here and still beaten me. You could have known it was a trap but be smart enough or strong enough to get out of that trap.'

The muscles in the Deidum's sword arm twitched impatiently. 'The wing,' Jerai demanded.

'Well... how long did it take you to put a wing on all those

spacecraft? The moment I saw your ships arrive with those on them I knew I'd beaten you. What ever did you think they were for? How many hours did it take to get a useless wing to flap? Think of all those engineers you assigned to get them to work. If they hadn't been doing that, perhaps they could have been building something else, something which would have won this war for you. A weapon or a tactic or another piece of intelligence.' He put a hand to his mouth. 'They did look very amusing, though. That's typical of my sense of humour. Yes, very me.'

Jerai looked at him through narrowed eyes.

'Why? Why did you do this?'

'You'd have won,' Braxiatel said simply. 'More to the point, I'd have lost.'

'You haven't won yet.'

'No. But I've proved that there are forces at work here that are bigger than either of us – bigger than your people, or mine. At my old school they had a saying: "Time plays silly buggers with us all". Time travel can make you obsessed with what is "meant" to happen and what you can do about it. Sometimes, trying to change it only causes it to happen. Sometimes, trying to make it happen causes you to do things you'd never otherwise have done. Sometimes, a thing happens and in doing so causes itself to happen again, and again, and whether you call that God or cosmic forces or time playing silly buggers, you can't control it, and neither can I. At one point I admit, I thought your victory was inevitable. I don't think that now.'

'I will kill you.'

Braxiatel shook his head, a little sadly. 'I have enough to work with.' Jerai suddenly straightened, looked around, keen senses searching around him.

The energy bolt scored a scarlet line through the whole of the sky, passed through Jerai's chest, then tunnelled a hundred metres into the rock. Jerai tumbled onto his knees, the sword fallen from his hand.

'A little unsporting,' Braxiatel admitted. 'I have a small ship in low orbit. It's armed, in case you did decide to ambush me. Then again, you're a philosopher and a scholar and a warrior and whatever else it was you called yourself. You probably just worked that out.'

'Recognise Their Sacrifice As Your Own,' Jerai said quietly.

Braxiatel had to admit he was startled that the Deindum was able to speak.

'I'm sorry?'

'The inscription on the Capra Marbles. Finally, yes, I recognise it as my epitaph. Have you recognised your own epitaph, Irving Braxiatel?' Braxiatel stared at Jerai.

That was the last of the Deindum's strength. The creature toppled

forward, puffing up the dust.

Don't Do Something, Just Sit There

Kate Orman

Bernice is giving Incy's eyestalks a good scrubbing when she realises the villagers are leaving. She drops the brush back in the bucket of soapy water. Outside the window of her tent, the Tidlangadlanga are putting down tools, picking up eggs and hatchlings, and filing out of their village. The Flatties move briskly, but there's no running, no panic, just a steady exodus.

'The air raid siren,' says Incy. Bernice grabs her notebook and some gear. 'Come along,' says the Sidlangadlanga. She ducks out of the tent into and joins the steady stream of villagers.

Incy takes one of her hands, slowing his steady trudge to match her two-legged pace. Making sure the big, clumsy visitor doesn't get left behind. When she tries to stop for a moment, craning her neck to scan the hot late afternoon sky, he moves her along gently but firmly. His family have been alien wranglers for more than a millennium.

Slung around Bernice's neck is a ceramic disc embedded with electronics. She thumbs the switch on the side with her free hand, sliding up the volume until she can hear not just the ultrasonic moan of the siren, but the thick waves of Sidlangadlanga chit-chat all around her. They sound at all times like a school bus full of teenagers.

They look like coffee tables with seven stick-figure legs. Or arms, depending on what they're using them for at the time. She has the crucial knack of telling aliens apart: Incy is the one with the reddish chevrons behind the chunky trumpets of his eyestalks.

The Flatties' boxy shadows stretch out in front of them as they tip-toe through the rich, dark jungle, spangled with flowers the colours of chillies, up to the hillside and the pursed mouth of the cave.

Bernice has to stoop to get inside. Luckily for her spine, after five minutes' awkward walk the passageway opens up into a natural high-ceilinged chamber. Tidlangadlanga are lighting lamps and breaking out mats: their air raid shelter is well-stocked. They've left the sound of the siren outside, but inside the echoing cave, the Tidlangadlanga conversation sounds like bats gossiping. Bernice snaps the pitch device off again.

The chamber is packed to the stalactites with works of art. Carefully wrapped canvases. Endless hologram projectors with run-down batteries or corroded circuitry. Statues, large and small, from the hands, mandibles, and pseudopods of a dozen species.

BOOM

Nothing here is the work of a Sidlangadlanga; the only things the Flatties place inside the caves are the carefully pressed and dried remains of their relatives.

BOOM

Incy ambles over to her and puts a tiny clawed hand on her arm. 'The boxes,' he says. 'You can sit on one if you want.'

He leads her over to the villagers, who are crouching on their mats, stringy legs curled beneath them. Some have eggs resting in the natural round niches of their spines, or young instinctively pancaked on their backs. Some wash each others' eyestalks, bringing buckets of warm, sulphurous water from a spring a little deeper down. Some doze, eyestalks dropping, backs slowly rising and falling.

BOOM

There's no shaking or falling rocks when the bombs hit. Just an immense but distant sound, like a single beat from God's disco. How far away are the explosions? Bernice can't tell. She wonders if there'll be anything left of the village. The Tidlangadlanga aren't worried, they really aren't. Anything that gets broken, they just rebuild.

Some of them are even meditating, holding stock still, as if they're not even breathing. Bernice perches on her box, trying to remember the instructions Incy gave her: straightening her back, half-closing her eyes, trying to get a grip on the frightened rhythm of her breathing. After a few frustrating minutes she scowls, blinks, and looks down to find Incy watching her.

'Your gills,' he says helpfully. 'Try to focus on them, where the air enters and leaves,' 'I can't keep thinking about the tip of my nose no matter how hard I try.'

'Try not to try.'

'Oh, Incy. That's easy for you to say.' But the cave has become warm and bright, and the children are drifting off to sleep. For a moment she could believe that the noise overhead is only a bad thunderstorm.

'At this moment,' says Incy, 'you have everything you need. The only thing you have to do is listen.'

'Listen to what?'

'The dancing. The sound of dancing inside your own head.'

BOOM

Bernice swears. Incy says, conversationally: 'The Alphyns. About four hundred years ago, they came here, chasing an escaped slave craft? Did you know that?'

'Oh – I catalogued an Alphyn votive only yesterday,' she says.

'There was a short, fierce battle between the slaves and their former masters, which concluded when the slaves launched a torque grenade.' Bernice raises her eyebrows. 'Grief!'

‘It blew every bit of vegetation off the hill, from top to toe. When we emerged from our cave, the hillside looked like a bald head.’ He rotates his eyestalks for emphasis. ‘But none of us was hurt, and the aliens were gone. That’s the way it always happens.’

Bernice manages to resist the urge to pat his head. ‘Thanks, Incy.’

She shifts on the box, a little uncomfortable. At least she’s not the only one with the fidgets: a Flattie foursome are hefting canvases to one side to reach a stack of mummies. The thin corpses have toppled over like a ream of paper. As they shift the paintings, a bunch of cave insects emerge from their hiding place. They look like lobsters the colour of raw meat. One of the villagers whistles at them, and they scatter: one would run right over her boot. Ugh, thinks Bernice, suppressing an urge to stomp on it. (For that matter she still sometimes has the urge to stomp on a Flattie, a fact she keeps to herself.)

‘It’s getting a bit cramped in here,’ she remarks.

‘True that,’ says Incy.

‘What are you going to do when you run out of space?’

‘In the past,’ says her handler, ‘we would move earlier donations into deeper parts of the cave.’

‘Hmm. I’ve had a peek down some of the cracks and tunnels. You’d have to be flat to get through most of them.’

‘Beauty,’ says Incy. ‘Flat is it.’

Bernice deciphers that and smiles. Why not? ‘True that.’

‘Do your eyes require cleaning?’

‘No.’

For three days all Bernice has done is rummage through sculptures; she hasn’t had a minute to jot down any of her observations about the Tidlangadlanga. Incy gives her a lamp. She gets out her notebook and spends a slightly panicked thirty seconds locating a pencil about her person. She writes:

The Tidlangadlanga have a reputation for being taciturn, never wasting words, seldom saying anything at all. Watkinson got an entire post-post-doctoral thesis out of the supposed importance of silence for Tidlangadlanga culture. If he had only thought to use a pitch modifier, he’d have realised that the T. almost never stop talking: the weather, gossip, poetry recitals, riddles, mathematical puzzles, wordplay. Watkinson called the T. preliterate, but they’re non-literate, keeping their culture constantly alive in their conversations – and their conversations constantly alive.

The Flatties don’t have any representational art, either.

They like colourful patterns, but they have no drawings, no sculpture, nothing at all that mimics objects. The kids don't even have dolls. It's not a religious thing or a sensory thing it just wouldn't occur to them to do it. If they want to describe something, they do it with words or numbers.

Everyone wants to *do something* about the Flatties. They've been taught to read several times. And every visiting species seems to want to bring reproductions of its finest art to inspire the T. It's as if dolphins tried to teach humans to echolocate.

The Flatties say they store the stuff in this cave because it's dry and cool, and safe from quakes and spores: they call it their museum. I'm starting to suspect it's really their basement. They just need somewhere to put all this junk people keep giving them.

Of course, there's more going on than just cultural generosity. The human missionaries were prospecting for naturally thoriated glass. The Tidlangadlanga lucked out: there wasn't any. Or at least, not enough for anyone to bother refining it. The settlers were gone in a decade, leaving a bald hole in the jungle which soon grew over.

Judging by the sheer variety of species represented here by their art, Beta Ischiasis has been a popular truck stop for a long time – a planet blessed with breathable air and drinkable water, but not much else of interest. Threatened, a Sidlangadlanga will whip its legs inside its shell like retracting vacuum cleaner cords and squash itself flush with the nearest flat surface. They use the same strategy with visitors: keep your head down and wait for them to go away.

The Flatties' tactic always worked – until now, when some genius in Earth's military decided Ischiasis would make a useful refuelling point on the way to the front. The moment the Deindum sussed it out, they started building their own bases, and bombing everything that wasn't theirs. The humans reciprocated, of course. At least they had the grace to set up the air raid sirens. I'm pretty sure this is the first time the Tidlangadlanga have used the cave as a shelter for the living as well as the dead.

The Tidlangadlanga have been very good about my mission, very cooperative. Mostly they've just kept out of the way and let me get on with it. In their five eyes, I'm

just one more alien intruder, and the safest way to deal with me is to help me find what I'm looking for as quickly as possible so I'll go away again.

After a couple of hours, Bernice can't stand it anymore. She grabs her torch, clambers up a pile of rocks, and stabs a beam of light into the largest of the crevices leading deeper into the hillside. There's enough room for a human to drag themselves through, if they're not too particular about the skin on their knees and elbows, or the odd clonk on the head.

Incy wakes up, stretches, and strolls over, effortlessly walking up the wall to where she's sitting. Bernice makes a face, guilty about interrupting his sleep with her alien blundering, then wonders if he's worked out how to read her expressions. 'Erm. I think I can fit through this one,' she says.

'I don't advise it.'

'Incy,' says Bernice, climbing down so she can look him in the eyes (albeit sideways), 'You said your people used to store things in there.' She jerks a thumb at the hole in the wall. 'I haven't found what I'm looking for out here, have I? Maybe I need to search further back.'

'I don't advise it,' repeats Incy patiently.

'Ah,' says Bernice. 'Why did your people stop storing things in there?' Incy deadpans, 'Your hand. Put it inside.'

'What!'

'Or a stone, throw it a stone.'

Bernice wishes she could read his expression. She picks up a pebble and tosses it into the crevice.

A moment later, a dozen of the naked lobster things come swarming out in confusion. 'Ugh ugh!' yelps Bernice, half sliding down the scree. 'There are larger ones than that,' Incy informs her, 'deeper in.'

'They're gross, but they're not dangerous – hang on, how much larger?'

'No-one's gone inside to find out,' he says. 'For a long time.'

Bernice grabs her pitch thing and starts fiddling with it. 'Incy,' she says, 'I should really be on my way home right now, but I remembered something I'd read about this damn thing being somewhere in this area and now I've started looking for it I'm determined to see it through. I've been to three different planets – including landing myself in the middle of a skirmish on Set colony, which I sorted out whilst I was there, so it wasn't a complete waste of time – and searched every library that's still online.

I've deciphered archaic catalogue numbers, I've searched through archived electronic discussions, I've even thumbed through actual paper books for a drawing which turned out to be of something else

entirely.’ She pops off the ceramic lid of the device. ‘If I’m only ten metres away from the thing and I don’t get my hands on it I am going to scream and throw things. Lots.’

She jams her thumb into a circuit, and the pitch corrector emits a satisfying shriek. The cave insects instantly vanish into the shadows. Bernice grins at Incy. ‘Come with me. It’ll be easy for you. Flat is beautiful.’

‘I decline.’

‘Oh well,’ says Bernice, hoisting herself into the tunnel entrance. ‘Over she goes.’ And the next thing she knows:

Silence.

It’s the first thing she hears. She can’t hear anything. She can’t even hear herself breathe.

Bernice wakes up properly with a yell that echoes back at her, but muffled, as though her head’s wrapped in blankets. Where – what – ?

Blind! She’s blind! She holds her hand an inch from her nose and she still can’t see it. Where’s the torch? Not on her belt – not in her pocket must be on the ground somewhere – find it, find it! FIND IT!

Oh thank you, Goddess, God, Buddha, the Pope, and Mum. She snaps the light on so quickly that it shines right into her own eyes. Spinning it, blinking violently, she sees cave walls, pools of water, piled objects large and small – but mostly, darkness.

The torchlight finds the wall where she came in. The tunnel she squeezed through to reach this inner cave is choked shut, stuffed with more rubble than it can hold: fragments of rock have spilled out of its mouth across the floor of the cavern. A quake could’ve brought the roof down, but this is something else, a force punching inwards, knocking her flying, vomiting dust and stones everywhere.

The Flatties’ outer cave has been hit. A direct hit on their shelter. The Deindum have gone and shoved a bomb right down its throat.

Bernice slaps the palm of her hand against the new-built wall of debris and screams. ‘Incy! Damn it! You should’ve come with me!’

You sons of bitches. The whole village was in there, down to the eggs. ‘Damn it, Incy,’ she whispers, crumpling, lying with her cheek against the cold stone of the wall. ‘You should’ve...’

Light on her face. Bernice wakes with a start, shivering violently, jumping up to hop about and rub her hands together.

She cranes her neck: sunlight is coming down through a gap in the cavern’s ceiling. A newly-made hole, courtesy of the bomb? If so, is the whole roof going to come down on her? Or was the opening there last night and she just didn’t clock it? How high up is it, anyway? She can’t make out a single detail, just a shape of sky over her head.

She barely got a look at this inner cavern before the explosion. Now

everything's dimly lit by the dusty shaft of light. Morning? Afternoon? Her watch, a cheap replacement for the beautiful one given her by Braxiatel several birthdays ago, has been smashed. She yanks it off her wrist and throws it away, crankily.

It lands amongst a pile of statuettes.

Bernice crouches. The figurines are human work – small-scale replicas of iconic works in tough vacuum-formed ferro-resin. There's 'Cloud Gate', that's Coyolxauhqui. The explosion has tumbled the miniatures and blanketed them in dust, but she picks up the Venus de Milo, and the tip of the lady's nose hasn't even broken off.

Argh! That's not a statue, that's a dead Flattie!

The corpse is dusty, and most of the legs have dropped off. The poor fellow died in here, and was never given a proper mummification. Wait a minute – there's another one behind a miniature Ishtar of Mari. Cheap burials? Murder victims?

She spends a few minutes looking around for more corpses. Five in total, as far as she can see, all of them a long time dead. Each one looks as though his or her carapace has been cracked open, or even crushed, but Bernice can't be sure that's not just the work of time.

She wants to ask Incy about it, but of course she will never ask Incy about anything ever again.

Back to work. She starts standing the figurines up on the cave floor and blowing off the dust. Madamombe, Löwin-2-exe, Michelangelo: mostly textbook stuff. There are some eccentric choices, though. The de Chirico seems out of place next to the postcard-obvious works, as does the Yoko Ono. These are someone's personal favourites, thinks Bernice, slipped in amongst the canonical stuff.

Now, look at this. Chunky as a chesspiece, the length of her forearm, two thick-bodied figures locked in combat. Awide-shouldered, flattened human figure, sketchy face stretching into a beak or a helm, arms blossoming into wings. Leering above the bird, a great round-eyed snake – no, there are legs; more like an immense lizard.

So that's it: mission accomplished. She's found what she came to find, what the Deindum didn't want her to find. So much that they killed everybody, easy as snapping their fingers.

She wants to smash the thing, frankly. If it wasn't unbreakable ferroresin she might have a go.

The Deindum have killed her too, if she can't find a way out of here.

After only an hour she has to give up looking for a way to reach the skylight.

A careful search has turned up only one other exit: a pit in the cave floor, deep enough that the beam of her torch barely touches the

bottom. Shifting the light around, she thinks she can see other passageways leading off though there's no way to tell how wide they are, let alone where they go, if they go anywhere. Problem is, if she gets herself down there and there's nowhere to go, how does she get back up again?

She squints up at the gap, where the colour of the sky slowly changes as the hours move on. She hasn't got as much as a rope. At a pinch she could free climb up there, but the walls slope backwards towards the hole: she'd end up dangling by her fingernails. Very briefly.

Even if she could make it, there's another problem. Call it concussion, call it imagination, call it what you like: the freaking walls are moving.

There they go again! She turns, staring hard, but the ripple of motion on the rock face has disappeared again. Whatever it is, assuming it's anything, it moves too quickly or too briefly, for her to get a good look at it. The only impression she has is that it's big. Some kind of weird post-bombing geological tremor? Some natural mineral phenomenon? Rampaging shadow-demons?

She sits down on a rock, shifting to stay in the thin warmth of the sunbeam. The human strikeforce knows about the villagers, of course, and they'll have detected the bombing. They'll come looking to see if anything's left. And of course they'll look for survivors. Won't they?

She chews her thumbnail. She's not sure the military actually know about the caves. If not, rescue might depend on their curiosity.

The water's probably safe to drink. There's nothing to eat, though, not even fungi. Already she's having elaborate risotto fantasies. If she gets desperate, she could try eating some of the cave insects. Heaven knows there are enough of them, she thinks. Ho ho, I've eaten worse.

I have to do *something*.

If Incy was here, if he was still alive, he'd be telling me to sit still, with that unflappable patience of his. *At this moment, you have everything you need*, he'd say. I wish the little bugger was here. *Listen to the dancing in your head*.

Oh, Incy, it's hard to dance with a mountain on your back.

Well, maybe, for the sake of his memory, just now she won't go climbing up or down, or working on a way to catch the cave insects. Just for a while, she won't do something; she'll just sit here.

Sitting on her rock, trying to listen to the dancing, Bernice loses track of time. The shaft of light moves across the cave with the Ischian sun. Perhaps that's what gets her attention, as it leaves her face in shadow. She opens her eyes.

A giant lobster the colour and texture of raw horse meat is looming

over her.

She did wonder if that might have been what was moving around on the walls: the reason that the Tidlangadlanga abandoned their original repository. The reason for the dead Flatties who share the cave with the statues. The thing standing not a metre away from her, slowly waving from side to side, would be able to snip them in half with its pincers or stomp them into mush. It must have been watching her all this time. Waiting for her to hold still long enough to sneak up and grab her.

Right. Right then. If this monster is anything like a Flattie, then its shell can be cracked open with, say, a nice hard piece of rock – or better, a ferroresin figurine. If she's quick, if she's determined, all she has to do is –

A small, still voice, deep inside her head, some bit of grey matter with an iron determination to live, says: IT LIVES IN A CAVE. IT'S BLIND, YOU IDIOT. SIT STILL. SIT STILL.

She sits still.

The lobster knows something's out of place here. Some taste in the air, some wrong sound. Will it decide to have a feel around? Will it get bored and go away? How long can she hold the hell still?

Oh. Oh bother. There's something scraping around in the shadows to one side. She can't get a look at it, however hard she slams her eyeballs to the left, but she can guess what it is.

Now there's a faint screaming in the air. Grief, are these horrors using biosonar? Or are they chatting with each other? 'You have the white, I'll have the dark.' The sound's getting louder by the second.

There's an odd, hollow noise, high above, and then the screaming is almost unbearably loud, bouncing around inside the cavern like a furious hornet in a bottle. Bernice scrunches up her face, grinds her teeth together, anything to suppress the urge to clap her hands over her ears.

It takes her a moment to realise the lobsters are gone. They've fled from the high-pitched whistling, and she doesn't blame them. Bernice shoves her forefingers deep into her ears, staring up at the military PA speaker dangling from the hole in the roof.

The hill's been turned into a pile of rocks of every shape and size. Human soldiers in jungle camo wander over it, slipping and sliding in the scree. Bernice is delighted to see them: there's nobody like the military to get a job organised and done, with the obvious exception of winning wars.

The OIC is a lieutenant who looks like he probably hasn't started shaving yet. 'Found a bunch of lobster things, and boy, they were cranky. We think there are hundreds of 'em in there. Good thing we

had that air raid siren to scare 'em off. I think that hole we pulled you up through was one of their air holes – we've found 'em all over. Haven't come across any Flatties yet, though. We won't give up looking.'

'Don't you dare.'

'Not while we can still hear noises under there.' He takes off his cap and scratches his head. 'What the hey is that thing, anyway?'

'It's a Deindum, look. The lizard thing is, anyway.' She holds up the figurine, turning it in the sunlight. 'They must have known what I was looking for, or somehow they knew it was there. You see, that's why they bombed the cave.'

The freckled soldier gives her a does-not-compute look, and Bernice gets it all in a moment: it wasn't the Deindum who targeted the Flatties' cave.

She wants to grab the kid by his dogtags and scream into his face. What did you think you were doing! What did you think was in the cave! Did you notice the Deindum sniffing around here? Did you think they had something hidden here, a base or a depot, was that it? What could possibly have been worth this?

Not like this grunt is going to know. He's giving her a funny look, now, startled by the snarl she's trying to wipe off her face, and you don't want to be given funny looks by people with guns, especially inexperienced people. She walks away, looking for some excuse, something which could plausibly have caught her attention. Someone's shouting; she wanders across the devastation in the direction of the noise.

A bunch of the soldiers have gathered around a pit they've dug in the wreckage of the hill. Some of them watch the rubble intently, some are taking a step or two back, creeped out by the sight: a hole in the ground through which spidery legs protrude. A corporal squats down by the hole, grabbing hold of the waving limbs, bracing herself to haul the Sidlangadlanga out.

'No!' says Bernice, running up. 'Don't pull on their legs!' The soldiers stare at the madwoman with the insane hair and the thick layer of dust. 'They'll come right off in your hand. Just make the gap nice and wide.'

She knows how to make it sound like an order, and they do as they're told, scraping back the dirt and rocks until a Flattie gets enough legs through the hole to hoist the rest of itself out.

'Incy!' Bernice shouts. The Sidlangadlanga has lost two legs and an eyestalk; he'll grow them back in time, but right now he's wobbly and dusty and alive.

'Alive,' observes Incy, spinning his eyestalks. 'You are it.'

'Beauty,' says Bernice. 'Flat is it!'

More of the villagers are coming out of the hole, in various states of disrepair. Some have kids on their backs, and she sees an egg being handed out of the hole with infinite care.

‘How did *any* of you survive? What did you do?’

‘We did nothing,’ says Incy. ‘Small pockets of air – many of us were trapped in them. The cave monsters – we would have died but for them.’

‘What! They didn’t stomp on you?’

‘Almost immediately, they were digging through the rubble, clearing it away.’

‘They were *rescuing* you?’

‘I think they were simply maintaining their habitat,’ says Incy. ‘We stayed flat and let them get on with it.’

‘Those “insects” are their offspring, aren’t they?’

‘I think so.’

‘Good thing I didn’t eat one, then.’

‘If you had killed one, its parent would have killed you. If you had tried to leave the cave through a passage, its guardian would have killed you. If you had attacked a monster, it certainly would have killed you. In fact if you had done anything at all you would have died. How did you survive?’

‘I didn’t do anything at all.’

Incy gazes up at her through his remaining eyes. ‘What you were looking for. Did you find it?’

She shows him the statue. ‘I was hoping there might be more detail of the Deindum body – some clues to their biology, anything that might help. But what really interests me is when and where this came from, and why it was made. The style is unmistakably Minoan. An hour with a decent library and I think I can pinpoint the time and place.’ She has to smile. ‘Still chasing references, even now.’

‘Hmmm,’ says Incy politely, and then, ‘Ugh! My eyes! They’re filthy.’

‘Let’s get you sorted out.’ She grabs a grunt. ‘Bring buckets of water. And scrubbing brushes – shoe brushes will do, if they’re clean. Plenty of them – we don’t know how many Flatties are going to come out of that hole.’

‘Yes ma’am.’

‘Wait – oh my God! If Peter knows anything about this he’ll be going spare.’ Peter is passing the time at the military encampment’s Visitors’ Centre. ‘Get me a communicator!’

‘Yes ma’am. Anything else, ma’am?’

Bernice thinks for a second. ‘No, that’s it. Scoot!’

The soldier scoots. Bernice turns to her friend.

‘And now, Incy, my flat friend, I’m going to give your eyestalks the

scrubbing of a lifetime!’

Six Impossible Things

Simon Guerrier

One

‘Oh,’ said Doggles with surprise. ‘Thought that was me cooked.’

He lay on the cool, hard floor, waiting for someone to make the obvious gag that their luck would have to change sometime. But no-one spoke and he couldn’t hear them breathing. Just across from where he lay, something stank of burning flesh and plastic.

‘Is anyone hurt?’ he asked, hearing the tremor in his voice. Again, no one deigned to reply.

Slowly, keeping his well-renowned cool in a crisis, Doggles opened his eyes. Smoke curled above his head, a complex Brownian motion of different shades of grey, the apparent chaos all strictly defined by simple physical laws. Through the smoke he could see the low ceiling, each curving segment held in place by rivets. The rivets were the standard 98mm gauge, thicker than his wrist and built to take anything deep space could throw at them. That ought to have been some comfort but it only rang alarm bells.

The rivets had been built for deep space, away from all the planets and people. A moment ago, Doggles had been inside a base on Earth’s Moon, working on the teleport systems of a BPM...

He sat up quickly, his whole body one enormous, livid bruise, his scars aching. The smoke and the ceiling lurched around him. He quickly closed his eyes again, finding his sense of balance. Slowly, with care, he opened his eyes and fixed on whatever was right in front of him.

The large, metal face of a BPM stared back at him, its whole enormous body arching over to reach down to his level. Doggles instinctively jerked backwards and the wide metal eyes dilated with a whirr, keeping him in perfect focus. Braxiatel’s protective mechanoids were six metres tall and packed with the best technical gubbins Doggles could provide. The robot’s chest unit hung open, a man-sized cavity seeping wires and stinking smoke.

‘You look like I feel,’ Doggles told the robot, scratching his fingers against his unshaven chin. He fought back the urge to gag at the stink. His eyes were wet with tears, his limbs trembled as he struggled to his feet. The robot reached out an arm like a tree-branch to steady him. The robot could not stand up straight in the confined space, and didn’t half look a fool all hunched over.

They were in a short section of corridor on what Doggles guessed was either a remote out-station or satellite. The curved walls were secured by thick rivets, as was the only door. There were no door controls or communications systems – the corridor was empty but for Doggles and the robot. His ears were ringing, which might mean they were deep underground, running out of oxygen or that the explosion he'd felt had been real. None of these options were good.

‘Go on then,’ said Doggles, stoically. ‘I must have crossed a wire and triggered a teleport. Where are we?’

The robot said nothing. Its insides ticked and steamed as several finely-tuned and highly-efficient automatic repair systems totally failed to come online. That, Doggles knew, didn't bode well either.

He ducked round the robot's head and under its bent-over neck and shoulders, and poked a hand into its hot and smoking chest. The cavity was built to contain a person, but the space was now filled with a mess of burnt systems and melted wires. At first Doggles couldn't make sense of it – these weren't systems he'd put in the thing himself. Then he remembered that the robot had been stood next to a drinks dispenser when the explosion had occurred. The two machines had somehow merged during teleport. Doggles shuddered. This mish-mash of ruined electrics could have been him.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘Can't be helped. Just got to get on with it.’ He pushed his hands into the hot, smoking innards, the robot not protesting as he tore out its rotten guts. With a bit of luck, the merger would only be superficial. The robot could reach out an arm and re-focus its eyes, so the damage couldn't be too severe. There was still something to hope for.

It didn't take him long to destroy that thesis. The chest cavity had taken the brunt of the merger. Matted wires and circuits filled the whole casing. There was no recognisable trace of the neat stasis chamber in which the robot could keep a person safe for years. There was also nothing left of the transmat systems that might get Doggles back to the Moon.

Doggles let out a sigh. He looked down at the wires spewing from the chest cavity on to the floor, the tangle of broken, fused components. There had to be something he could use.

He looked round at the robot's silent, staring head, hanging over his own shoulder. ‘I'll cannibalise you for parts,’ he told it. The robot nodded slowly. ‘And then when we're rescued I'll make you again, good as new.’

The robot didn't answer. Instead, one branch-like arm snaked quickly round, a huge metal hand striking at his face. Doggles had barely recognised the threat this presented when the hand stopped just in front of his eyes. His reflection gaped back at him from the

metal fingers, then smiled.

‘Thought that was me cooked,’ he said. Then his reflection looked puzzled. ‘Wait, didn’t I say that before?’ He felt giddy again, the smoke getting to his head. And after all, he’d just been in an explosion.

‘Need a lie down, forty winks,’ he said, feeling sluggish. But the robot’s hand remained poised in front of his face. Doggles tried to swat it out of the way – and missed, even though the thing was right in front of him.

He realised the problem in the same moment that he recognised the position of the metal fingers. The thumb and index finger were together, making an ‘oh’, the remaining four fingers fanning out behind.

Doggles looked around. There were no door controls or communications systems. His ears were ringing, it was getting hard to breathe and there were spots in front of his eyes. And now the robot was telling him in sign language that the air was running out.

Doggles whirled round, looking for anything to help. The corridor was empty but for him and the robot. There was nothing to help him and he didn’t have enough air to think.

He reached instinctively for the robot, plunged his hands once again into the mess of its insides. Perhaps there was something... perhaps he could do something...

But his thoughts were clouding with smoke. There was no possible way out of this one...

Two

To his amazement, Doggles found himself waking up feeling pretty good. A mask over his nose and mouth plied him with neat oxygen which might explain the euphoria, but he was also alive. Grinning, he unstrapped the mask and sat slowly up.

‘That was pretty brilliant of me,’ he said. ‘If I do say so myself.’ Then he looked around. ‘And nobody else is going to say it for me, are they?’

The empty room glowed softly green, illuminating the standardised fittings of a small cargo ship, very much like the ones that came to the Collection. He’d been dozing in one of two ample berths, the bed fitted with standardised medical and entertainment facilities. Beside him a screen explained the state he was in: battered, bruised and knocked about, but generally okay.

Doggles slipped gingerly down from the berth onto two unsteady, bare feet. Someone had taken his clothes and exchanged them for a medical gown which was open at the back. As he turned again to the information screen, he felt the air on his exposed bum.

It took a moment to dig deeper through his medical status and see how narrowly he'd made it. Brain function had only been restarted by a sizeable dosage of nano-active drugs. He instinctively reach a hand up to his head. His thoughts might still be artificial.

He thought back, remembering those last moments, struggling to patch together something from the BPM's insides. The trouble with sending a distress signal in a time of war was not knowing which side might be listening. With his fingers still on the screen, he quickly tried the entertainment suite and found a Terran-centric mix of programmes, including two-dimensional dramas that Benny had once tried to foist on him. The ship had originally come from Earth, and he couldn't imagine the Deindum falling around with what would seem to them horribly primitive technology. So he'd been rescued by the right side.

'All right,' he said, 'who are you then?'

The information screen didn't respond. 'Identify and locate crew,' he told it, huffily. The system still didn't do anything. Annoyed now, Doggles manually tried to get it to answer him, but the screen only offered to make him a fruit infusion or play him some light jazz. It was locked on the 'chillax' setting.

'Fine,' he said, marching over to the door control and bashing it with fist. 'I'll go see for myself.'

The lozenge-shaped door only beeped at him and declined to open. He bashed the control again and it beeped once more. A small display screen by the control flashed the word 'declined'. He stood there, twitching with anger.

'I,' he said, 'am a lot bloody smarter than a door.'

It took Doggles all of four minutes of fast typing on the information screen to convince the ship that the door presented an immediate danger to the rest of the cargo. The tricky part was not making the door explode – Doggles didn't want his escape to attract the crew's attention. Whoever had rescued him and saved his life had still locked him in.

With a satisfying lack of any noise at all, the door slid gently to one side. 'Oh,' said Doggles, gazing through the open doorway. 'Thought the ship would be bigger.'

He stepped through, into the ship's cockpit– smaller than the room he'd just been in and with an unexpected low ceiling.

'Ow,' he said, rubbing his bruised head. 'I suppose there's a good reason for locking me up?'

The huge, muscular pilot responded gruffly without looking round. 'Didn't want to spend the whole way back 'avin' to talk to you.'

'Charming,' said Doggles, slumping down into the seat beside

Adrian.

This didn't look quite so nonchalant as he'd intended – the medical gown flapped up and out around him and then fluttered gently back down. The enormous Killoran seemed (or pretended) not to notice, eyes on the screens and read-outs as he plotted a course.

The last time Doggles had seen Adrian, they'd been about to part company on the Moon. Having lost contact with Bernice and Peter due to a comms failure on the dark side, Adrian and Bev were eager to depart – Bev's kneecap had been shattered by a Deindum android, and although the healing process was underway Doggles didn't advise teleporting in her state. He'd invited them to rest at his covert Moon facility and then teleport when she was healed, stressing that this would be safer for them too after war broke out. But Adrian and Bev quite clearly wanted to leave as soon as possible, and Doggles couldn't really blame them. They left for Earth in the ship in which they'd come.

Doggles had vaguely assumed that, one way or another, he'd never see either of them again.

The ship was gearing up for interstellar transport. Doggles checked the readouts. At first he didn't believe them. 'Good grief. We're forty-seven light years from the Moon? That was quite a slip.'

'Yeah,' said Adrian.

'But you found me,' said Doggles, incredulously.

'Picked up your signal,' shrugged Adrian. 'Had an alert set up in case you popped up. Lucky for you it wasn't all that far from us. Came as fast as I could.'

'But you of all people, coming out to get me,' said Doggles.

'Bev didn't think I should come at all. We looked for Bernice and Peter but we missed them, so we headed back to the Collection. She really wanted me to come with her. I wanted to an' all. But instead, I made her get off and take a refugee transport so I could come out here and save your arse. Take it as a compliment.'

'But it's not possible,' said Doggles. 'You. Saving me.'

'An' why's that?' snarled Adrian.

Doggles sank back into his seat, almost wishing he'd been left for dead. It would have made things so much simpler. 'Because,' he said in a small voice, 'of what I did.'

Three

Three years before, Doggles sat at Cafe Vosta, the Collection's cosy little diner, with the woman he so admired. She didn't know that of course – he'd always played it so cool she had never noticed. Professor Bernice Summerfield sat opposite him, drinking her wine and enjoying the evening.

That had been the point – taking her out to dinner so she could briefly forget all her woes. Her doggy boy had just killed her principal lover, Jason Kane, and she was all a bit in pieces. Needed a friend to take her out for something to eat and a few carafes of wine. They had a table outside and it was a beautiful evening. Then he would take her back to his rooms for some medicinal shagging.

They chatted about nothing important, except that Bernice had a way of worming her way into people's innermost thoughts, and as if to make her feel better about her own misery, he'd found himself confessing all.

'All right,' he told her. 'You know about survivor's guilt?'

'This is about the Axis, yes?' said Bernice, sitting forward with interest, and giving him a better view down her top. She'd battled the Axis single-handed, been responsible for ending the empire. In so doing, without knowing it, she'd freed him. 'You made it out of their laboratories,' she said. 'And thousands of others didn't.'

Doggles shifted uncomfortably – he never liked admitting weakness. 'Sometimes I don't think I did either,' he said. Then he sat back in his seat with his wine, trying to seem objective. 'I've read the case studies, I know there's a precedent. I'm a rational, intelligent man.'

Bernice smiled. 'And yet?'

Doggles shrugged. 'I remember dying,' he said. 'I remember being dead. But whatever they did to me, it means I just keep on going. A corpse pulled along by strings.'

Bernice reached out across the table and took his hand. Her fingers were so slender and elegant in his. 'You're never going to be the same man you were,' she told him.

'No, I don't want that,' said Doggles. 'But I want to stop feeling... like someone else's puppet, nothing inside but machinery. Don't you feel it too? The war is over but we're still not safe.'

Bernice withdrew her hand from his. 'That word again.'

'What word?' asked Doggles.

'The students will be safe if they have weapons. Peter will be safe if he stays locked up.' She shivered where she sat, and he quickly topped up her glass of wine.

'I'd be more worried about everyone else's safety,' he said, 'if Peter were let loose!' She stared wide-eyed at him. He grinned sheepishly back. 'Sorry,' he said. 'One for different company.'

The badly-timed joke cost him sex with her that night but she came to see him the next evening, breaking into his rooms while he slept. He affected surprise and then saw her hesitate. Rather than press her he went through to the kitchen to make tea, casually not putting his clothes on. She'd seen it all before anyway.

‘So,’ he said, as the kettle boiled.

‘So,’ said Bernice, watching him from the doorway, arms folded and all businesslike, ignoring the urge to glance downwards. ‘What did he offer you?’

Doggles bent over to search the cupboard for tea bags, though he knew they were already on the counter. ‘Who?’ he said. ‘Jason?’

Bernice sighed behind him. ‘You know perfectly well who I mean.’

Doggles turned back round to face her. So, she’d not come to him for sex but to talk about Braxiatel and his plans. Brax had warned him that this might be what happened – and how he should respond. ‘Hell,’ he said, running a hand up over his forehead and through his thick, matted hair. ‘Look, he said you might want cheering up. It’s not like it was going to be a chore.’

Bernice nodded, taking this in, and Doggles could see that he’d lost her. Benny, who could read your unconscious thoughts like they’d been written on your forehead, so hated to feel played. ‘But there was an incentive,’ she said. ‘Get me into bed, he’d let you work on the weapons systems.’ She smiled thinly. ‘He must really rate your prowess.’

‘He’s not wrong to!’ said Doggles, grinning – though he could see she had slipped from his grasp. ‘But that’s not how it went,’ he assured her. ‘You and me, Benny, we’ve both been... damaged by things that have happened.’ He held his arms out, presenting his bare flesh. ‘At least you can see my scars.’

She looked at the lines criss-crossing his torso and legs and he saw her falter. She had been in a Fifth Axis prison herself, but they’d not done anything so unpleasant as they’d done to him.

‘Brax is just looking out for us?’ she asked him, and he knew she so wanted that to be true. He turned away from her, fussing with the tea, letting her believe it instead of trying to force her.

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘Milk and sugar?’

‘Just a little milk,’ she said. ‘Are you all right?’

He looked round, to find himself scratching at the scars on his own chest. For a moment he gazed at his arm in amazement – he’d done it without any conscious thought. ‘Yeah,’ he said, not wanting to show weakness, returning to the tea. ‘Scar tissue always itches after I wake up. Like someone’s pulling on my strings.’

He turned, and found Bernice coming forward towards him, such tenderness in her eyes. Just like the night before, the thought of him being tortured – and dying – had played to all her natural instincts. He hated the thought that he’d lost her, but he hated even more that he could only trick her into bed.

‘I’m not surprised,’ she told him. ‘The Axis went to town on you, didn’t they?’

He flinched, and found himself again scratching at the scars without meaning to. 'Trouble with being irresistible, really,' he said, feeling somehow distant. Benny, stood just in front of him, seemed a world away. He desperately wanted to reach out to her, to touch her, to feel something real. 'Everybody wants a poke.'

She took a step back from him and raised that infuriating eyebrow. 'Everybody?'

Anger coursed through him in a flash. She was going to turn him down. 'Well obviously you have to be different,' he snapped.

She only smiled. 'It's what keeps you interested,' she said.

And then –

Then he'd –

No, that hadn't been him. All he'd been and felt and thought was –

The anger coursing through him, the terrible fire in his veins. The pain and terror and burning he'd felt once before, strapped into a gurney, his skin peeled and pinned back to leave his innards open to the air, toxins clogging in his blood, his body fighting, his heart giving up, his last breath and thought and feeling before he –

But that wasn't possible.

Four

'What I did to Benny,' said Doggles, 'what I tried to do... That wasn't me.'

'So who was it?' snarled Adrian, still working the controls.

'All right, it was me,' said Doggles. 'But someone was pulling my strings.'

'You're blaming Braxiatel,' said Adrian.

'He didn't mean me to go so far,' said Doggles. 'But yes.'

Adrian muttered under his breath. On the dashboard in front of him a series of three small warning lights began to flash.

'Should it be doing that?' asked Doggles.

'We've got company,' said Adrian. 'Trouble with fighting a race who can travel in time. They know everything we're going to do.'

Doggles sat forward in his seat and began punching buttons and levers.

'They're sending out a recon net. Just working out where we are. If they wanted to fire at us, they'd have to –'

The ship was suddenly tumbling backwards, Doggles' medical gown flapping up over his face.

'Hell,' he said, struggling to tug it back down.

'They're warping space around us,' said Adrian. 'Trying to fold us in.'

'What?' said Doggles. 'That's not possible!'

‘Well then,’ said Adrian, busy with the controls. ‘We don’t need to worry, do we?’

Doggles tried to make sense of the numbers on the read-outs. Beside him, Adrian masterfully dodged the ship in and out of the unseen attack. He’d always been so practical and cool, thought Doggles, for all his tongue hung out of his mouth whenever things got dicey.

With a flash, Doggles remembered another time, the last time he had been on his own with Adrian.

‘You shouldn’t have come for me,’ he said.

‘No,’ said Adrian, gritting his teeth as he struggled with a manoeuvre.

‘You should have left me to die.’

‘Yeah,’ said Adrian and he smacked a control button hard. Suddenly the noise of the activity ebbed away, leaving just the warm hum of the ship around them.

‘You beat them,’ said Doggles, amazed.

‘Gone interstellar,’ said Adrian. ‘Taking a slightly scenic route through a dust system. With that and the cloak, we should be all right.’

‘We’ve got, what,’ said Doggles, doing some very complicated sums in his head, ‘eighteen hours before we get back.’

‘Yeah,’ said Adrian, swivelling round in his seat. It was the first time he’d looked at Doggles since he’d come into the cockpit. Adrian was big, even for a Killoran, and had been an accomplished, fearsome soldier before he’d become the Collection’s odd-job man. Now it’s just you and me.’

Doggles nodded, slowly. ‘For eighteen hours. If you came all this way, and then I died... No one would suspect a thing.’

‘Yeah,’ said Adrian. ‘I considered that myself.’

‘You’re a very good pilot,’ said Doggles, eager to keep the conversation going.

‘Good at a lot of things,’ said Adrian. ‘Always been good with my hands.’ He flexed the huge, muscular paws, showing the talon-like claws. ‘People probably overlook that,’ said Doggles nervously.

‘People like you?’ said Adrian. ‘And Brax?’

‘Brax never understood how Benny escaped,’ said Doggles. ‘And I couldn’t get it out of you, however hard I tried. It must have been something incredibly clever.’

‘Not clever,’ said Adrian gruffly. ‘But something he’d never understand.’

‘You must have helped her,’ said Doggles. ‘You and Joseph and who knows who else. And then you stayed behind.’

‘Had to keep an eye on Braxiatel, didn’t I?’

‘But you knew what we’d do to you,’ said Doggles. And then he

understood. 'Oh.'

'Yeah, well,' said Adrian.

'You acted selflessly,' laughed Doggles. 'That's what Brax could never understand.'

'Always been a bit of cynic, that one,' said Adrian. 'Doesn't understand loyalty, things like that. And love.'

Doggles shook his head, amazed. 'You're a good dog,' he said at last. 'No offence,' he added quickly.

'If I was gonna kill you,' said Adrian, 'I'd 'ave done it by now.'

Doggles nodded. 'And no one would blame you,' he said. 'Might be for the best. I'm not in control of myself. I could still hurt someone else.'

Adrian didn't look round at him, and Doggles could see the huge, strong man considering the possibility with care. Then he turned slowly in his seat. Doggles tried to sit up straight and brave. He knew he'd been on borrowed time for years and now he'd be at peace.

He just hoped he'd be spared too much pain.

Five

A clock ticked and old Earth music played. These were the plush surroundings of Braxiatel's room at the heart of the Mansionhouse, the heart of his fiendish web. Priceless antiquities gazed down on the gurney in the middle of the room and the enormous dog-man strapped there, screaming out in pain.

'Arrrrrrrgh!' cried Adrian Wall. 'I don't know.'

Doggles moved round him slowly, a scalpel poised between his fingers. 'You were the last one to see her, Adrian,' he said mildly. 'You must have seen something.'

'Nothing! Arrrrrrgh! Damn you, Doggles. I can't tell you anything!' Doggles sighed. 'There's no such word as can't.'

He continued to work on his patient, the huge Killoran convulsing in the straps and screaming.

'Well, technically, yes there is,' Doggles went on. 'It's in the dictionary, as a contraction. But you understand what I mean. Don't you? Don't you? Come on, you can articulate. I've not even started on your mouth...'

He knew it was wrong and he wanted to stop. This wasn't who he was. But the part of him that objected was cut off from the rest, watching himself work as if through someone else's eyes.

He could soon barely see or hear his victim. Instead, there was another gurney ahead of him, another man strapped down, the man's eyes wide and unseeing. The man tortured to death by the Axis so many years before. A man he'd got to know, gaping back at him in his reflection.

But how could he die and still be alive? It wasn't possible.

Six

'Open your eyes,' Adrian told him sternly. Doggles did so. Adrian's huge, doggy face was up close to his, his breath all rich and meaty.

Oh, Doggles realised, he's going to gobble me up.

'You're right,' said Adrian. 'No one would blame me. I'm a Killoran, it's what we do.'

'Yes,' said Doggles.

'An' it would be so easy. I just say you were dead when I found you, or died of your injuries after. Bev'd understand, and Benny. No one would ask any questions. You've got few friends as it is. I thought it all through on my way out to find you. The perfect chance to get my revenge.'

Doggles nodded. 'Perfect, that's the word. Well, you'd better get on with it, old boy.'

'But,' said Adrian, 'we're fighting an enemy that travels in time, who's got a handle on the future. There's only one thing we've got against them. The same thing we've got against Brax.'

Doggles felt a sudden excitement inside him, the thought that he might not be this huge creature's next meal. 'We act selflessly,' he said.

Adrian shrugged. 'We do what's least expected,' he said.

'Yes!' said Doggles, clapping his hands. 'That's how we win. Of course it is. Well done Adrian!'

Adrian only stared at him. No, they weren't going to be friends. Doggles swallowed and said much more soberly, 'So what do we do next?'

'You an' me,' said Adrian, 'we work together. Get back to the Moon, use your technology and do what they least expect.'

'Brilliant!' said Doggles – and was delighted to see Adrian grin. 'So, brilliant like what?'

Adrian turned back to the controls. 'I dunno,' he said. 'That's what you're gonna have to work out. It's all up to you now.'

'Me?' said Doggles.

'Yeah. The fate of the universe might be in your hands.' Adrian gave Doggles a glance. 'It's a pissar, isn't it?'

Interlude

Eddie Robson

Hass was having another dream about running through space.

He'd had several of these since he started out from Earth. They were always the same and always this simple. He was in space, surrounded on all sides by stars, and running. He could see no ground beneath his feet but somehow there was something to run on – it seemed to cushion each foot as he stepped down, then release it with a generous push. It was like running along a gigantic mattress on which you never lost your balance. Hass sailed through the air, each stride covering perhaps dozens of metres, perhaps kilometres, perhaps hundreds of kilometres – in space it was impossible to tell. All he knew was that he was getting to where he needed to go.

Then Hass woke up, and he was hunched in a corner of the shuttleport. Not getting where he needed to go.

It was the early hours of the morning, but the port was busy regardless of what time it was. In the waiting areas, people slept. They also slept in various other places, despite the best efforts of the port staff to keep them out of the way. The inhabitants of the dock were a mix of evacuees, people who had got stranded when war had broken out, and survivors from war zones. Some people talked to the survivors, wanted to know what was happening out there. Most simply left them alone, unsettled by their nervous stares and habit of suddenly breaking down mid-sentence.

The food concessions had been instructed to stop accepting money, and instead accept vouchers which were strictly rationed. There were queues for the vouchers and queues for the food. This helped to pass the time.

Hass collected his daily vouchers. He never needed them all, so he sold the spares. He'd have liked to just give them away but he was aware that he might need some cash if the banking system went down. He tried to choose people who he thought needed them for themselves, not people who would sell them on for profit; but it was difficult to tell. In times of war all sorts of people did all sorts of things.

Then Hass queued for the maintenance facilities, discharged his radiation build-up and flushed the inside of his encounter suit. He never felt properly clean after doing this in a port, and today was the sixth day he'd been here. He longed for a proper bath.

Then Hass joined a queue for information. The departure boards

had been deactivated in order to disperse the crowds who had gathered around them waiting fruitlessly for news of the next flight. There was little useful information the departure boards could give anyway, as flights were being organised on an ad hoc basis depending on demand, availability of resources and danger level on the route. Those who queued up generally received little in the way of information either, but that didn't stop them queueing. When he reached the front of the queue Hass asked, again, whether there would be a flight going anywhere near Maximediras in the near future.

'Depends what you mean by near,' said the logistics officer with a baffled look on her face. 'That whole system's in enemy hands. You do know that?'

'I do, yes,' said Hass.

'And there's no liberation operation planned. Until there is, nobody's going there, not for any reason.'

'I have a friend there,' Hass said – which was true, although it wasn't the only reason or even the most important one he wanted to go to Maximediras.

'Lots of people have friends there. But you can't do anything for them. Closest we're going is Chloris 4 and they're not taking anyone in, so you'll just end up waiting around in another port for another flight. You'd be better off just getting yourself safe.'

Hass pretended to take this on board, thanked her politely and left the queue. Then he waited around in front of the mediascreen, hoping to find the man he'd talked to yesterday.

Large crowds of people hung around the mediascreen. Lots of standard interstellar comms had been taken down for security reasons, so many found their personal devices weren't receiving any data. Their main source of news was the mediascreen, pumping out the official version of events. Hass might have been less cynical about what he was seeing there if it hadn't been for the frequent presence of Irving Braxiatel, giving news conferences, speeches and interviews. Braxiatel had wasted no time in positioning himself as the man who knew what was going on, and had quickly converted his status of respected scholar and statesman to more or less the leader of the Coalition of Civilised Worlds, even though he tactfully presented himself as a mere conduit, a go-between.

There he was again, discussing the withdrawal of forces – Coalition forces and Deindum forces – from Set colony. News of this had come as a surprise: why had both forces withdrawn at once, leaving the colony (such as it was, after the battle) alone? Braxiatel – who seemed annoyed that this had become a story at all – explained that it had been an elaborate and successful bluff in order to conserve resources, and stressed that the Coalition was simply cleverer than the enemy.

Hass didn't hear the broadcast in full, because he'd found the man he'd spoken to yesterday. His name was Carlton, he was a middle-aged man of mixed human/Cahlilan ancestry, and he claimed to have ships to sell. Hass turned to Carlton, and Carlton nodded. Then he bobbed his head to one side, gesturing *follow me*.

Hass did so. Together they went into the private area of the dock. This was heavily guarded in anticipation of theft, but the guards recognised Carlton and let him and Hass through their cordon. The ships here either belonged to people who had come to collect other people, or people who had got caught up in events and ended up a long way away, or people who had got caught up in events and ended up dead. Hass suspected that Carlton's wares came from the last of those categories. Still, in light of what Hass had just been told – again – he needed to buy one.

Hass had made it clear to Carlton that he needed only the most basic facilities on any ship he bought, and Carlton had certainly found something that fit the bill. The ship was an orange planet-hopper, a cute thing with rounded edges: it had clearly undergone several repairs, and was essentially just divided into a front section and a back section. Hass did some basic tests, at which Carlton pretended to take offence, and was satisfied that although the ship wasn't really designed for long-range travel, it was in working order and would get him there. They haggled over the price, Hass claiming to have less money than in fact he had in order to drive it down, then Carlton took Hass' money and left him with his new ship.

Hass looked back at the dock, thinking of the desperate refugees and wishing he could take some of them with him. But nobody would want to go where he was going.

The War of Art

Jason Arnopp

This rocky plateau afforded Bernice Summerfield a clear view across the Palpiero and the heavens above. The war across neighbouring planets was so fierce, she could see the unholy glow of missiles scything through the skies.

The galaxy was on fire.

Not for the first time, she dared ask herself how this war could possibly be won – and in doing so, inadvertently relaxed her guard.

Something moved in the corner of her eye. Bernice had long credited strong peripheral vision for getting her out of various scrapes – and she was right. Once again, that sixth sense was about to save her life.

She glanced at the lone Deindum stealthily hovering towards her. A skull-turret had been grafted into the top of its head, like a third eye.

When the turret unleashed a fireball, Bernice was already diving out of the way.

While she was in mid-air, a section of wire-fence carved a nasty gash along her left thigh. The creature's fireball slammed into the spot where she had stood, scorching the earth.

Upon hitting the ground, Bernice curled into a roll, aimed her pulse-rifle at the beast and squeezed off a round before it could get another shot at her. It screamed as two energy-bolts found their target. Thus, thought Bernice as she scrambled to her feet and ran for her life, the difficulty of this war was summed up. Puny human technology was so antiquated compared to the Deindum's, even when you managed to shoot them in the face you still only had an even chance of winning the fight.

Bernice spent a full five minutes hobbling as fast as she could, while coated in a charming cocktail of sweat and her own blood. The thing issued booming commands as it gave chase across the cracked landscape. Luckily, ignoring orders came naturally to her. As did dodging explosions and the shards of rock which showered her, following its every near-miss.

The planet Palpiero was supposed to have been a relatively uneventful stop-off, on her way from Earth to the Collection. Her self-assigned mission was to locate and help potential survivors on one of Braxiatel's cargo-freighters, which had crashed en route from the Collection to Maximedirás just over a month back. Figuring that it

probably hadn't crashed by accident, and that it would probably be more than a little dangerous down here, Bernice had left Peter on the refugee ship, telling him to go on ahead with Bev, whom they'd run into en route. Peter would be fine with Bev, as Bernice told herself repeatedly.

Despite the sun's best attempts to blind her, she managed to head for some mountainous terrain. The kind which would at least give her more of a chance against the Deindum's onslaught.

By the time she wove her way along a ravine, the Deindum could no longer be seen behind her. She had hoped this space might be too narrow for the creature, but couldn't afford to bank on it. Yanking the backpack from her shoulder, she fumbled inside for a fusion grenade. A jutting rock scraped her wounded thigh as she passed it, making her grit her teeth.

These grenades, she knew, had default settings. Once you'd removed the seal they would explode mere seconds after leaving your hand, just like old-school grenades back in Earth's first couple of world wars. There was, however, a timer option. Right now, she could have cheerfully throttled whoever devised its menu system.

Menus. Sub-menus. 'Yes/No?' questions. Who the bloody hell had time, especially in the heat of war, to plough through all of these and stipulate their desired detonation time?

Back along the ravine, one side of the Deindum floated into view around a bend. The flame which consumed it burnt vigorously, as if in anticipation of the kill. Before its left eye had a chance to spot her as it navigated the turn, Bernice squeezed herself into a nearby crevice.

The Deindum had stopped issuing verbal demands. Perhaps it was back in 'stealth' mode. Did it know exactly where she was? Had it seen her enter the crevice?

The thing's ragged breath and the whoosh of its flames drew ever closer as she fumbled with that grenade.

Sod the timer, she decided. I'm going old-school.

She yanked off the seal, then lobbed the grenade around the corner.

A sharp intake of breath from the Deindum. Then an explosion and an almighty screech. Smoke billowed into Bernice's face as she slowly stuck her head out from the crevice.

The creature rested awkwardly on the ground, groaning, its flames weak. It seemed to be cooking from within, its flesh rippled and blistered. A fair chunk of it was missing. While these things' skulls were visible up-close, this was the first time she'd seen inside one.

One of the Deindum's eyes had ceased to exist. The other eye was fixed on her like a laser-sight. Bernice dithered, wondering whether she should employ a second grenade, just to be sure. Could she fight that kind of properly ruthless war?

A weaker, but still potent, burst of fire from the stricken Deindum's skull-turret made the decision redundant.

She ran, feeling the fireball's intense heat as it crashed into one side of the ravine.

Approaching the crest of a hill, Bernice cautiously dropped to her haunches, having spotted the upper spires of a huge spacecraft on the landscape ahead. Swiftly realising it wasn't a Deindum ship, Bernice rose to her feet, taking in the sight.

It was Braxiatel's cargo freighter. A quarter of it was embedded in one side of a mountain. Walking closer, she saw that other parts were missing – probably having been scythed off by Deindum fire, which caused the crash. The ship's rear end formed a huge dome.

The ship seemed to ripple, and she realised how dizzy she was. Her leg was drenched in lost blood and she'd ended up standing closer to the fusion grenade than recommended. Her ears rang, she felt nauseous and... why was the ground coming up to meet her so fast?

Five minutes later, a hexagonal hatch opened on the freighter's side. A muscular, shaven-headed man and a woman with spiky red hair emerged from the opening. Both were armed.

The pair crept across the landscape towards a seemingly unconscious Bernice. Every few yards they'd stop and look around, before deciding it was safe to proceed. They picked Bernice up between them and began carrying her back towards the ship.

She could vaguely – oh, so vaguely – hear their conversation, as if her ears were full of water.

'Don't you worry, honey,' an Irish woman said. 'You'll be fine. We're taking you somewhere safe.'

'Should've let her burn up in the sun,' a Frenchman muttered. 'Risking ourselves again. Not necessary.'

'Henri, shut your head. We have to set a good example.'

'Lynetta, that is a lot of crap. Just because we're, like, leaders of the group, we have to risk making an orphan of Luke?'

'He'd still have his gran,' she protested before sounding more contrite. 'I know, I *know*. It's just... I couldn't have something like this on my conscience, okay? Now lighten up and be nice.'

Lynetta laughed affectionately before heaving herself onboard. 'And don't forget to close the hatch behind you.'

Bernice heard Henri laughing grimly, despite himself. Then, when he followed Lynetta's orders, it was like a hatch closed on her conscious mind.

Bernice awoke horizontal on a bed in a small, functional room. An elderly woman with a kind face sat on a chair beside her. Bernice pulled herself upright with some difficulty, noticing that her leg had been expertly bandaged.

‘Hello there,’ she said. ‘Bernice. Feel a bit sick. Fusion grenade.’

The woman’s accent matched Lynetta’s. ‘Oh, my daughter’s always cursing about those things.’

‘It’s the instructions,’ Bernice croaked. Nodding sympathetically, the woman offered her a glass of water. Bernice accepted, sipping it and clearing her throat. ‘Manual’s rubbish.’

The old woman smiled. ‘I’m Helen. You’ve been out for an hour. You’re on the freighter which you probably saw before keeling over.’

‘Ah, yes, of course,’ Bernice said, looking around. ‘So you’re... the crew, are you?’

Helen shook her head. ‘Whole crew snuffed it. We’re just a bunch of filthy squatters.’

Bernice swung her legs over the side of the bed and ran a hand through her hair, trying to clear her head. So her mission had been in vain.

‘Had a Deindum right on my arse,’ she said. Seeing Helen’s features crease further with alarm, she added, ‘I’m sure it was in no fit state to chase me, after that grenade. What kind of defences do you have here?’

‘Forcefield still works, around the ship,’ Helen said. ‘Keeps the looting gangs away, any road. Them floaty lizard-faced bastards haven’t even tried. Yet.’

‘They probably just see the ship, think “victory” and move on. So how long have you been here?’

‘Almost a month. Well, me and my family were the first to arrive. Then we let others in from time to time, based on a group vote. It’s usually a dead cert if they’re a family. Or, you know, look decent.’

‘I’m honoured,’ Bernice said, rising unsteadily. ‘How many of you are there?’

Helen stood with her. ‘If you’re feeling well enough, then come and see.’

Helen led Bernice out of the sickbay into a long corridor. The floor was at a slight angle, which made sense as Bernice remembered the freighter’s positioning. She noticed the outer hatch’s hexagonal outline as they headed away from it, towards the heart of the ship. The shrieks and whoops of kids at play could be heard in the near distance. She instinctively thought about Peter, but knew she could do nothing to affect his safety right now. All she could do was look after herself so she could get back to him. Stay the night here, then head off in the morning.

Halfway along the corridor, a cloying stench distracted Bernice from Helen's small-talk. She couldn't help but visibly react. Obviously expecting this, Helen indicated a large blue door on the wall beside them.

'The crew,' she said. 'We put them all in there. Didn't know what else to do. You know, there's disease to think about and all sorts.'

Bernice pulled a face. 'And you weren't inundated by offers to carry them out and bury them, right?'

'Right.'

The reek lessened as they reached double doors at the corridor's end. Helen pushed a button on the wall. As the doors parted with a hydraulic hiss, the hum of chatter and children became louder.

Bernice could best liken this large, lengthy chamber to ancient photographs she'd seen of London air-raid shelters during those Earth wars. Beds of varying kinds lined both sides of the room – each surrounded by bags of what Bernice assumed were each family or group's personal possessions. People's homes had been reduced to tiny territorial patches.

There were around forty people here, mostly couples with children. Some sat on the beds. Some strolled leisurely, as if trying to convince themselves they were in beautiful gardens. Others were engaged in everyday activities, like hanging clothes on a makeshift washing line. Life went on.

It struck Bernice that this had once been the freighter's spacious flight-deck. Dead electronics lined the walls and it looked as though railings had been removed from the floor to accommodate more sleeping space. A few instruments continued to glow healthily, however, and a large scanner screen remained functional on one wall. It showed the spot outside where Bernice had collapsed, and two mountains beyond, between which the sun was threatening to set.

Another wall housed a transparent cabinet, containing a pretty impressive armoury of weapons. Various guns, rifles and grenades. Even a rocket launcher.

Helen clapped her hands for attention. 'Evening everyone. This is Bernice – our latest arrival.'

Bernice waved at no-one in particular. 'Thanks for your votes. It's been an emotional rollercoaster.' Some people laughed and smiled warmly, or even applauded. A fair few stony or indifferent expressions made it clear who would have preferred her to become Deindum fodder. Looked like a 60/40 split in her favour. Only natural, she thought – every time they let someone into the ship, they risked losing everything. She didn't believe in luck per se, but knew that some folk saw it as a commodity which ran out if overly tested.

Helen led Bernice over to Henri and Lynetta, who were making

their bed with a cute 10-year-old kid, whom she rightly assumed was Luke. After the introductions, Bernice thanked Lynetta and Henri for rescuing her. The standoffish Henri soon led Luke off across the room, but Lynetta was a chip off her mother's block. She chatted away, traded motherly anecdotes and quickly offered Bernice something to eat.

'I'm famished,' Bernice admitted, perching on the end of their bed. 'But what kind of food supplies do you have? I don't want to be a burden.'

'We're fine for... well... another two months. Enough to outlast the war right?' Her eyes searched Bernice's for clues. 'How's it going out there?'

Bernice chose her words carefully. The loss of hope could kill as quickly as malnutrition. 'It's tough.' A child ran past screaming and crying, with a bruise on its arm. 'But I have faith that we can beat them.'

Anyone who knew her would have clocked the lie immediately. 'Faith'? Why the hell had she said that?

'Music to my ears,' Lynetta said, walking over to a freezer unit embedded in the wall. 'We reckon this old thing used to travel back and forth a lot, delivering stuff – it's got a whole heap of food in storage. Bung it in the micron-tube and it soon heats up. It's at least edible, like. And we got a system for collecting rain water, up on the roof. Relies on the weather, o' course.'

She fished out a packet of food and tore it open. Bernice warmly smiled her thanks, then looked around the space again. She wondered how many more pockets of humanity were dotted around Palpiero and every other place where the Deindum had left their mark. If humans lost the battle, then archaeology might unearth these time capsules, hundreds, or thousands, or millions of years down the line and attempt to surmise why these people had lived and died here.

Bernice shuddered, annoyed at how this conflict had darkened her thoughts.

'There are more kids than this, by the way,' Lynetta said, shoving Bernice's food in the micron-tube. The machine lit up as she activated it. 'A few of them are playing in The Head.'

Bernice looked quizzical. 'The Head?'

'Yeah. Big old head. It was the main cargo. It's big! Oh, you've got to see The Head.'

Bernice had known that the freighter was carrying materials for Braxiatel's intended museum on Maximizediras. However, she hadn't expected anything quite like this. Perhaps that grenade had given rise to hallucinations.

She stood in the freighter's rear dome, gawping up at what Lynetta had referred to as The Head.

Braxiatel stared back down at her.

Or at least, this 150-foot model of his head.

God only knew what it was made of, but it looked pretty solid. Possibly a combination of plastic, wood and brick. Lengthy steel struts tethered Braxiatel's ears to opposing walls, while a third stretched taut between his scalp and the ceiling. His mouth seemed to double as an entrance door.

The face was intensely irritating. Its smug expression said Look at me! Am I not incredibly wise and learned? Bernice pictured the bastard posing for the likeness, disguising his delight at the whole endeavour with paper-thin modesty. He had probably sat with a forefinger and thumb on his chin.

'What's it like inside?' she said, agog.

'Some kind of art thing,' Lynetta said. 'An installation. Shite if you ask me. Kids've trashed most of it since we got here. We told them not to at first, but it keeps them occupied.'

Two children appeared inside the white of Braxiatel's left eye and waved at them. Bernice smiled and waved back. 'Good kids,' she said.

Behind Bernice and Lynetta was a huge, wide staircase, like something from a bad talkshow. It rose up to a big door which led back to the main chamber.

Suddenly a large, long-haired man was framed by the door. He cupped hands around his mouth and shouted down. 'There's something outside. One of them.'

As Bernice made her way back up those stairs alongside Lynetta, dread pricked her spine. She felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for having come here. Or at least, for staying more than five minutes.

The group were staring at that wall-mounted scanner monitor which relayed footage of the area immediately outside. It depicted a Deindum hung in mid-air, on the far side of a blue forcefield which protected the ship.

Bernice instantly recognised the creature. A chunk of it was missing. The one remaining eye was wide and bloodshot.

The Deindum's flame burnt hard and fast. It began to edge its way through the forcefield. Inch by slow inch.

Bernice twigged that more people were watching her than the monitor.

Some couldn't make eye contact, whereas others positively glared. Sensing the mood, Helen hurried over to join Bernice and Lynetta. 'Don't even think it,' Helen told everyone.

'Yeah,' Lynetta said, putting a protective hand out in front of

Bernice. 'We all stick together.'

Bernice gently took Lynetta's hand in her own and lowered it. 'Don't worry everyone,' she said. 'I'm leaving.'

'No,' Lynetta said decisively. 'No way. Henri and I risked our necks to bring you in.'

'And for what?' Henri said, from across the room. 'Look what's happened.' Beside him, Luke anxiously looked from one parent to the other.

Silence reigned. Bernice smiled warmly at the group. 'It's fine. You're families. With priorities.'

'You're a mother too,' Lynetta pointed out.

'Yes. A mother who's brought hell to your door.'

Bernice glanced back at the scanner. The Deindum was a quarter of the way through the forcefield. She had to move fast.

'Someone get me a better gun than I came in with,' Bernice said. 'Actually, two would be nice.'

People couldn't move fast enough. They hurriedly opened the arms cabinet and yanked out a bewildering variety of rifles, pistols and grenades. Bernice found herself deluged with options. She took a couple of formidable-looking blasters, favouring their reassuring weight. She slid a fusion grenade into each back pocket.

On the screen, the Deindum was halfway through that translucent barrier.

Somewhere in the background, amid all the chatter, there was a hydraulic hiss.

No-one noticed.

Something burst into flames, mere feet away from Bernice.

No. Not something.

People.

Several people, in fact. Enveloped by fire, they ran across the room in blind panic. Those around them screamed.

Horried, Bernice struggled to comprehend what the hell had just happened. Through the smoke and pandemonium, she saw the Deindum – *her* one-eyed Deindum – floating into the room from the long corridor. Behind it, the freighter's entrance hatch was wide open.

Glancing back at the scanner, Bernice saw that same Deindum, barely three-quarters of the way through the forcefield. Damn! Had it travelled in time? Unlikely. Intelligence reports suggested that the Deindum's time-travel capability cost them considerable effort, so tended to be reserved for life-threatening emergencies. More likely, it tampered with the video-feed, so that they'd been watching its progress several minutes beforehand.

Bernice ducked away from Lynetta and Helen, separating herself from them for their own sake, while waving her arms in the air.

‘Hey,’ she called out. ‘You only want me. Here I am.’

The only reply was a fresh ball of fire from the Deindum’s skull-turret. It hurtled through the air and slammed into an entire family, immolating most of them before they had a chance to make a sound. The others ran around, on fire, bumping into people and burning them too.

‘No!’ Bernice bellowed. Children’s cries filled the air. Lynetta and Helen managed to push one of their burning friends to the ground, wrapping them in bedcovers, desperately trying to stem the blaze.

Bernice leveled both blasters at the thing and pumped the triggers. The weapons had a tougher kickback than she’d expected, but it barely seemed to matter.

One of her shots caught the Deindum near its remaining eye, which only seemed to enrage it all the more.

‘Total death,’ it boomed, issuing two fireballs in quick succession.

The first fireball whooshed so close to Bernice’s head that her hair singed. She could tell from the agonised screams that it had struck Lynetta and Helen head on, but she had no time to react to their deaths. The second fireball was squarely aimed at her and she couldn’t hope to dodge it entirely. She could only minimise the impact. As she tried to duck, the blazing projectile struck the left hand side of her face and torso, setting her flesh alight.

The chaos around Bernice felt slow and muted. Images of Peter flashed through her mind, including one of him standing at her funeral.

Poor kid.

So. This was the end.

One thing was for sure: she’d take that bloody thing with her.

She reached into her back pocket and grabbed a fusion grenade, already breaking into a run towards the Deindum. She roared as she charged it. A roar so unhinged that she could barely recognise the product of her own vocal cords.

The skull-turret twitched, refocused on Bernice and belched forth another fireball.

A burning man ran between Bernice and the projectile, accidentally taking its full force. He was practically ash before he hit the ground.

Bernice charged on, removing the grenade’s seal as she neared the creature.

The Deindum’s face showed both hatred and fear as it pumped one, two, three fireballs at her.

One struck her shoulder. Another her chest, full-on.

She was already airborne. Howling like a madwoman, with the grenade in one hand, diving straight at the Deindum.

A human fireball.

A tiny voice at the back of her brain whispered, There are *worse* ways to go. She landed astride the Deindum as the grenade's casing burst open. The explosion never extended beyond the size of an apple.

It immediately ceased to exist.

All atoms ebbed into nothingness, as the Deindum activated its time-travel protocol.

History was dragged backwards, kicking and screaming every second of the way, with the creature spinning at the tornado's eye.

Approaching the crest of a hill, Bernice cautiously dropped to her haunches, having spotted the upper spires of a huge space-craft on the landscape ahead. Processing what little imagery she'd seen, Bernice swiftly realised it wasn't a Deindum ship. She rose to her feet, taking in the sight, evaluating the craft.

Braxiatel's cargo freighter. Bits missing, no doubt thanks to the Deindum.

Dizzy, dizzy, dizzy...

Her ears rang, she felt a little nauseous... and whoah! Up came the ground.

Almost immediately, a hexagonal hatch opened on the crashed freighter's side. A muscular, shaven-headed man and a rotund man with long hair emerged from the opening. Neither were armed.

The pair strode across the landscape towards a seemingly unconscious Bernice. They picked her up and carried her back towards the ship.

Still dimly awake, Bernice was aware of their silence. There was one exclamation from one of the men, when they almost dropped her, but that was it. Still, when someone was pulling you out of the ocean you'd be churlish to demand a reassuring speech into the bargain.

And then, as sleep came, her mind was full of nightmares. Pieces of time residue, clinging to her soul.

She dreamt of a scanner image on a wall. It showed the one-eyed Deindum, against a rocky exterior. Her mind's eye rotated away from the scanner, to see the same creature make a sudden appearance at a nearby set of double doors.

She dreamt of fire, destruction and self-sacrifice.

Bernice was still trying to put a finger on Henri's demeanour as he led her from the sickbay into a long corridor.

He had seemed detached from the moment she woke up in that bed. While she was grateful for the bandages on her thigh, she doubted that Henri had applied them himself: they were so tight, they practically qualified as a tourniquet. Neither had he demonstrated much of a doctor's bedside manner, what with those hard chocolate-brown eyes and apparent aversion to smiles.

Bernice mentally scolded herself for being so critical again. In a world at war, smiles really had to be earned.

When she'd told him about her encounter with the Deindum in the ravine, he barely seemed interested.

'Come,' he'd said, clumsily helping her stand. 'You are okay now. Come and meet everyone.'

Bernice kept a wary eye on Henri as she followed him into the ship's heart. The only sound came from their footsteps. No danger of weather-banter or knock-knock jokes from Henri.

Further along Bernice caught the faintest of bad smells, which seemed to originate from the blue door they'd just passed. As she looked around at the door, then returned to Henri, he gave her a strange look.

What was that look? A warning?

As they approached the corridor's end, she hoped the rest of the stragglers here were more friendly.

Henri jabbed a button by a set of double doors. They slid open with a hydraulic hiss, revealing a large space which reminded her of the London air-raid shelters during those old Earth wars... except for the distinct lack of wartime spirit. Most of these thirty-or-so people seemed subdued. Even some of the children.

It was weird. Yes, conditions were far from ideal, but why was everyone so damn jittery? Did she look scary? Was there blood on her face? She hadn't thought to check a mirror.

'Hi,' she said. 'I'm Bernice.'

The few smiles rang false.

She noticed an armoury cabinet on one wall. Only a few weapons, like that rocket launcher, remained. Most of these people were armed.

Very jittery indeed.

Henri introduced Bernice to his wife, Lynetta – an Irish lady who struck Bernice as quite odd. She was a bag of nerves and unable to make eye contact.

Lynetta's mother Helen was no better, and Bernice struggled to get a handle on them. Both women did their best to make conversation as Bernice gathered the basic information about their time in the freighter. Nevertheless, their apparent nerves couldn't help but have a knock-on effect. She found herself throwing the odd glance at the wall-scanner, to survey that surrounding terrain. Could the Deindum have survived the blast? She wouldn't put it past those things – they were like cockroaches.

Minutes later, Bernice noticed Lynetta and Helen arguing in a huddle with several other members of the group. They were too far away for Bernice to hear what was being said, but Lynetta furiously

shook her head and appeared on the verge of tears. Helen nervously glanced across at Bernice, suddenly aware that she was watching the debate.

Lynetta's voice rose to a yell. 'No! I won't be a part of this. I've had enough.'

Her head jerked to face Bernice as she spoke quickly and urgently: 'Darlin', please, get out of here. Just run! Quick!'

The other members of the huddle pushed Helen aside in their hurry to restrain Lynetta. Helen tried to intervene, but another division of the mob held her still too. Others drew guns, aiming them at Bernice. Children stood at the periphery of it all, bewildered.

Wondering what was going on, and vividly aware that everyone was staring hard at her, Bernice tried to stand. Two strong hands immediately grabbed her arms behind her back.

'Get the hell off me,' she said, unable to see her assailant.

'No, Henri, no!' Lynetta cried. 'This is wrong. We can't do this.'

Bernice tried to resist Henri, but he was too strong and she was out of sorts. Warm metal brushed against her wrists and there was a clunk. Henri released his hold on her, but she soon realised why. He had put handcuffs on her.

'All of you, help me,' Henri ordered. 'We are in this together. If we do not give this thing what it wants we will all die together. Remember what it has told us since it came. It will kill us without a thought.'

'What "thing"?' Bernice demanded, as Henri dragged her to her feet. 'What does it want?' Nobody answered her. Several members of the group bustled towards her, hands outstretched to help Henri. She managed to kick a few of them back. Someone tried to punch her but Henri blocked the blow.

'It wants her conscious and alert,' he growled. 'Remember?'

The mob lifted Bernice above their heads, so that she faced upwards. 'Henri,' Lynetta warned, 'if you do this, then we're over!'

'I'm doing this for our son,' came his scornful reply.

The procession headed to the opposite end of the flight-deck and descended a large flight of stairs.

Already alarmed and confused, Bernice became thoroughly disorientated as the huge face of Braxiatel slowly invaded her limited field of vision. Surely this had to be a nightmare.

'I'm sorry,' said one of the men carrying her. 'We have no choice. It came to us two hours ago. Told us you'd be arriving – minutes before you turned up outside.'

Other voices below told the man to be quiet. He persisted: 'It's insane. Been eating most of the dead crew. And it killed one of our families. Burnt them alive. Said the same would happen to us unless

we gave you to it. It really wants you.'

The man's voice vanished from beneath her, as did his hands. Sounds of struggle to one side of the procession suggested that he had been silenced and dragged away.

Bernice now saw the full extent of the Braxiatel head. She noticed an orange light flickering inside that open mouth... and soon realised it belonged to a Deindum.

The creature appeared, framed by the doorway which formed Braxiatel's open mouth.

Bernice was shocked to recognise it as her old one-eyed friend. It must have used time travel to lie in wait for her here.

This was personal.

'Bring her to the mouth,' the Deindum said. It distanced itself from the entrance by lightly bouncing across the floor. Bernice had rarely seen Deindum on the ground: it couldn't be at full strength. Its voice was different, too: somehow more feral, with an insanely hysterical edge.

'I understand why you've done this,' she told the mob, even as she was forced through the door-mouth.

Their faces betrayed varying degrees of guilt and fear as they blocked her escape.

'You had children to think of,' she said. 'But please. There's still a way.'

'Silence,' the Deindum ordered. The group parted down the middle so that the creature could address its prey. 'I travelled back through time, in order to prevent your victory – one which you now will not remember. It never existed. And in this new timeline, the victory shall be mine.'

'Time travel, eh?' Bernice said, determined not to give it the satisfaction of looking as scared as she felt. 'That's just cheating. While you were at it, why didn't you hop back an extra fifteen minutes and ensure that I didn't blow half your head off?'

The Deindum laughed. Actually laughed. The horribly deep gurgle gave Bernice the creeps: she'd never heard laughter from these things.

'I revel in the enlightenment my damage has brought me,' the creature said. 'It has expanded my consciousness. Made me understand the motivational joy of torment.'

'You mean,' Bernice said, 'you're a big masochistic pervert?'

Its voice became positively hateful. 'You will die inside your friend's effigy. Die, die, die!'

Bernice began to protest that Braxiatel wasn't her friend, then quickly realised it would make no difference.

The demented creature continued to shriek 'Die!' as someone closed the entrance, thankfully muffling the sound. A heavy lock clunked into

place. Bernice found herself staring at a door, her adrenaline running riot.

A distorted electronic voice drifted down from a speaker grille in the ceiling. An all-too-familiar voice.

‘Hello, and welcome to The History Of Art According To Irving Braxiatel. Created and curated by me: Irving Braxiatel.’

‘Stand back,’ the Deindum commanded. The crowd scattered. On one side of the room Lynetta angrily squirmed away from the people holding her. On the opposite side, Helen watched the proceedings with disgust.

The Deindum’s skull-turret fired several fireballs at the base of Braxiatel’s head. The structure was instantly set ablaze.

Bernice was running, with her hands locked behind her back. Up through Braxiatel’s head. Upon guessing what the Deindum was about to do, not to mention hearing Irving’s voice, the only thing for it had been to distance herself from that entrance.

She had no idea where she was heading.

Climb first, think later.

She passed through various themed chambers, only vaguely registering the sheer egotism which inhabited every atom of the installation. Each chamber seemed to reflect Braxiatel’s views on various aspects of art throughout history. She had no time or inclination to consciously absorb them, but the odd word or phrase invaded her subconscious via speaker grilles.

‘My own personal interpretation of...’

‘If you’ll permit me a moment of whimsy...’

‘Forgive my dreadful indulgence, but...’

No I bloody won’t, she thought as she passed the hollow interior of Braxiatel’s nose, heading ever upwards, trying to forget about the mounting smell of smoke.

The uppermost chamber contained Braxiatel’s eye-windows. Smoke had already begun to rise through the floor and the heat was stultifying.

Running over to the eyes, Bernice booted a foot out through one of them. Smash! She saw Lynetta and Helen among sections of the crowd on either side of the room. Henri stood apart from both groups with an uncertain look on his face. Perhaps the reality of this was beginning to dawn.

The Deindum sat in the middle, facing Braxiatel’s head.

Its eye swivelled up to focus on her.

‘You will remain within the structure,’ it warned. ‘If you try to escape, I will incinerate all present.’

‘Think, everyone,’ Bernice yelled. ‘Think! It’s going to kill you all

anyway. I blew part of its brain out, and chances are that was the part which kept promises.'

'Quiet!' the creature said. 'I will honour our agreement.'

Smoke tickled the back of Bernice's throat, making her cough. Breathing became difficult.

'Hit... the,' she called down. A coughing fit interrupted her, but she returned to the eye-hole. 'Ears,' she said. 'Hit the ears...'

She fell to her knees, coughing violently as the smoke overcame her.

'This is bullshit,' Lynetta said, aiming a chunky blaster at Braxiatel's right ear. Before anyone could do anything to stop her, she fired off a shot at the strut attached to it. It burst, then snapped. The head swayed slightly.

'Come on,' she shouted. 'All of us together.'

'Stop this!' the Deindum demanded.

Helen added to the clarion call. 'We let it talk us into handing over one of our own,' she said. 'And now we're going to put that right.' She pointed at the left ear. 'Someone shoot it.'

A young man aimed a pulse-rifle and shot through the strut. Braxiatel's head swayed wildly.

The Deindum's voice rose in pitch. 'You will all die with her!'

Only the uppermost strut prevented the head from being released. Neither Helen's gunman nor Lynetta could see it from where they stood.

The Deindum turned to face Helen, its skull-turret zeroing in on her.

'No!' Lynetta cried.

A blast of pulse-fire shot up and broke the head's uppermost strut. Immediately losing interest in Helen, the Deindum stared upwards to see what had happened.

Lynetta was astonished to look across and see Henri's smoking rifle. Standing behind the Deindum, he briefly smiled at her, then returned his attention to the dangerously wobbling structure.

Inside the head, a stricken Bernice felt the structure's centre of gravity change. With everything left in her, she hurled herself against the wall between Braxiatel's eyes.

With a creak, the head tipped forward.

The crowd hugged the walls.

The Deindum issued a cry of panic as the realisation hit home. It moved away from the head, across the floor, in Braxiatel's shadow. Henri, dangerously close to the creature, ran for his life.

As the entire structure pitched over, Bernice ran with it, the centre of gravity shifting beneath her, faster and faster...

Henri dove out of range, but the Deindum was too slow. Braxiatel's forehead hit it squarely. The creature buckled for a split-second, then

burst with a sickening pop, spraying thick gouts of dark blood in all directions.

Inside the structure, for Bernice, Braxiatel's forehead had become the new floor.

She lay on the floor to avoid as much smoke as she could.

A speaker grille clicked into action. Braxiatel's voice sounded distorted and slightly sped up.

'And while it might seem rather gauche of me to posit this theory...' Boom. Voice and grille vanished in a split-second as Lynetta blasted a hole in the side of Braxiatel's head.

Bernice managed a laugh.

Damn. Beat me to it.

Bernice sat up on one of the beds, recovering. Someone had unlocked her handcuffs and put a blanket around her shoulders. God knew why. It was probably just a token gesture, to salve guilt. The atmosphere between herself and the others was precisely as awkward as you'd expect.

Helen pulled the blanket off as she and Lynetta appeared. 'Which bollocks put this on you?' she asked. 'You're boiling! So what are your plans?'

'Strangely enough, I'm keen to move on,' Bernice said. 'Soon as I stop feeling like I've smoked a barrel of cigars.'

'I'm sorry,' Lynetta said. 'So's Henri, even though he's too proud to say it.'

Bernice looked across at Henri, who was hugging Luke. She was about to reassure the two women that it was fine, but sharp exclamations from across the room stopped her.

People had gathered around the scanner monitor.

'Oh God,' someone said. 'Another one's here!'

Bernice got back on her feet and ran over to see.

Outside, a Deindum had begun to make its way through the ship's blue forcefield.

The Deindum. Its one eye livid.

Bernice stared at the image. This, she realised, was the original Deindum. The creature from the ravine, which must have duplicated itself by hopping back in time.

The fire-dream resurfaced in her head, telling her what was going to happen next. It felt like *déjà vu*, but with the chance to make the second event different. Very different.

She gestured for everyone to clear a path between her and the chamber's double doors, then extended a hand.

'Get me the rocket launcher.'

The Better Part of Valour

LM Myles

Bernice landed at dusk and left her shuttle a few metres from the edge of a small lake filled with a dark, viscous fluid that oozed over the rocky shoreline. The air stank of sweet chemicals and scratched at the back of her throat.

‘Bloody wonderful,’ she muttered, surveying the landscape for a moment before she ducked back into the ship to check her direction and the atmosphere. The air was poisonous but not enough for any permanent damage, provided she didn’t end up stranded. She tried not to think about it too much; the air wasn’t the real problem, after all. Attempting to make her way back to the Collection and rejoin Peter, Bernice had picked up a distress signal that had appeared distinctly Deindum in origin. She hadn’t been certain – she wasn’t aware that the Deindum had sent out any distress signals, for obvious reasons – but the chance of finding one of them vulnerable, of perhaps being able to help and open up some line of communication or understanding, or failing that just being able to capture them or their technology, was too good to pass up.

Bernice made her way north by north-east, climbing up to the top of a long ridge of rubble. The distress call had originated less than five clicks away but the land was scarred with half-demolished buildings, great drifts of debris, sheets of cracked plastic, broken metal; the shattered remains of prefabricated domes. In places it looked as though someone had scooped up great chunks of land and dropped them back down. It would be a nightmarish walk in the dark and the sun was going down quickly, but Bernice didn’t want to risk waiting another six hours before sunrise. The distress signal had only lasted a few seconds before it had been cut off, but there was no way to know who else had heard it.

She stumbled down the ridge to what passed for the road and headed towards what had been the richer residential end of the colony. There was just enough light left for her to notice when the ruins changed from plastic and metal to real brickwork when she heard a crunch of footsteps somewhere behind her.

Bernice ducked down behind a crumbling wall, pressed her back up against it, and resisted the urge to dose her eyes.

She reached for the pistol inside her jacket, hating the stupid thing even if it was about save her life. The footsteps came closer – a steady, regular pace – then stopped. Bernice looked up: a great shape loomed

out of the twilight above her.

She breathed a sigh of relief and stood up.

‘Damn it, Adrian! You frightened the life out of me. How did you get here?’ She put pistol away.

‘Long-range teleport. I arrived a safe distance away – unlike you.’

‘I didn’t know there was a safe distance with the Deindum. Besides, I was trying to avoid a long walk.’

‘Where’s Peter?’ asked Adrian.

‘On a refugee ship, with Bev. We bumped into her at a spaceport, both trying to find someone to take us within spitting distance of the Collection. Peter misses you, so does Bev. We asked her why you weren’t with her – she said you had other business to take care of?’

Adrian grunted. ‘Took care of it. I wanted to stay with Bev, you know,’ he added defensively. ‘Like I’m sure you wanted to stick with Peter.’

Bernice nodded. ‘Of course, of course.’ She thought for a moment.

‘Hang on – long-range teleport? You’re not working with –’

‘Doggles, yeah,’ said Adrian. ‘Seemed the best thing.’

‘If you say so. So is one of his BPM mechanoids here?’

‘Yeah, but it’s on stand-by. Took more energy to get here than we thought. I need it for the ride home.’

‘Oh,’ said Bernice. ‘Pity.’

They walked north through the mess of crumbling stone and rusting metal. ‘Messy evacuation,’ said Adrian.

‘You can say that again. They could have left the roads alone, at least. What’s the point in smashing them all up like that?’

Adrian shrugged. ‘Bit of fun.’

‘Fun? Fun? It’s just pointless destruction. God knows what they’ve destroyed along with the roads.’

‘Yeah, well, I don’t think they were very happy about leaving. Given how Earth usually handles its colony worlds, I doubt they had any other way to express their feelings.’

‘A strongly worded letter?’ suggested Bernice. ‘Smashing stuff up is hardly the most helpful response.’

Ten minutes later, darkness had fallen. Bernice thumbed on her flashlight.

‘You sure that’s a good idea?’ asked Adrian.

‘No, but it’s this or risk snapping an ankle in one of these blasted potholes.’

They were halfway to where Bernice estimated the distress signal had originated when a light appeared on the road ahead of them, then waved back and forth. ‘Hey! Hello there!’ The light was being held by a very humanoid silhouette.

‘He doesn’t look much like a Deindum,’ said Bernice. She waved

back.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ asked Adrian.

‘Being friendly.’ She walked on with a confidence she didn’t quite feel and ignored Adrian’s irritated growl.

The humanoid was a man, lean and tall. He wore a black flight-suit, absent of any identifying badges. ‘I saw your ship come down,’ he said.

Bernice tried to ignore the ‘I told you so’ look Adrian gave her.

The newcomer approached them. ‘I need your help.’

‘You don’t think this is a trap?’ Adrian asked Bernice as they hurried to keep up with Cole. He claimed to be part of a salvage team making a reconnaissance sweep of the old colony, and that his colleague had been injured in a fall in one of the storage sublevels. He’d been trying to figure out the safest way to get her out by himself when he’d seen Bernice’s ship land.

‘If it is, it’s not very good,’ said Bernice. ‘Bit obvious, isn’t it? The old “my friend’s trapped and needs your help” routine.’

‘We’re still running right into it.’

Bernice shot him a quick grin. ‘Yeah, I’d noticed that too.’

Their destination was lit by a glowing globe set on a tripod. It gave off just enough light for Bernice to see that there was a very dark, very deep, very large hole right next to it; an old ventilation shaft, she assumed. She approached cautiously and peered over the edge but couldn’t see anything below, save darkness. ‘How far is it?’ she asked.

‘Maybe fifty metres all the way down,’ said Cole, ‘but she was pretty near the bottom when she fell. I was about to go down when I saw your ship pass overhead. I thought it’d be quicker to get help than try and get her out by myself.’

‘What were you looking for down there?’ asked Adrian.

‘Anything that wasn’t stripped out when the colony was abandoned. This was a storage warehouse – filled with equipment for mineral surveys, surface mining, that sort of thing.’

There wasn’t a lot of light to work with but Cole quickly secured the ropes and harness and began his descent. A few minutes after he’d reached the bottom, he shouted up to them and Bernice and Adrian pulled up his injured colleague supported on the large sling Cole had rigged up. She was unconscious and wore the same style of flight suit as Cole. Her dark hair was falling out of a messy bun. Bernice could see that she was breathing easily, and when she checked her pulse it was strong and regular.

‘Hope we didn’t give her a concussion pulling her up like that,’ she said to Adrian as Cole climbed up over the edge of the pit.

The woman’s eyes flickered open. She turned her head towards

Bernice and managed a faint smile. 'Very grateful,' she muttered. 'Thank you.' She sat up with Cole's help and regarded her two rescuers curiously. 'Human,' she said. Her eyes flicked to Adrian and widened slightly. 'I don't know what you are.'

'Killoran,' said Adrian.

'I'm Bernice Summerfield,' said Bernice, 'and this is Adrian Wall.'

'Unity Lake,' said the woman. 'Delighted to meet you.'

Cole opened a flask and passed it to Lake who gingerly took a few sips. She had a few bruises and scrapes on her exposed skin but otherwise seemed none the worse for wear.

'Well,' said Bernice, 'now we've finished with the timely rescuing part, I don't suppose either of you have seen any giant floating reptile heads around here?'

Lake and Cole exchanged a glance and for a moment Bernice was convinced she'd just done something very stupid indeed and Adrian and she were going to end up dying ignoble deaths on a forgotten colony world. Cole's hand moved to inside his jacket, to a concealed weapon Bernice guessed, but Lake shook her head. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'I told you, I'm Bernice Summerfield. Professor, actually, if that helps. Of archaeology. I was responding to a distress signal.'

Lake raised an eyebrow at Cole and he shook his head. 'Not from me, there wasn't time, and even if there was, why take the risk?'

'Other than to keep me alive?' asked Lake irritably. She tried to stand up, flinched in pain and sat back down. She glared at her foot. 'Well, that's sprained, or fractured.' She glanced at Cole. 'I don't suppose you packed crutches?' She looked at Bernice. 'You responded to a Deindum distress signal.'

'That's right.'

'You wanted to help them?' Lake asked.

The truth was that Bernice actually might have done, if it had seemed prudent to do so – if it hadn't put herself or others at risk, and if there was a chance it might build some bridges. She wouldn't have left a sentient creature to suffer if she could help it. But this didn't seem the moment to come over all humanitarian. 'No,' she answered. 'I was hoping to get some information or technology. Anything that would help us to fight them.'

Lake gave her a thin smile. 'Such optimism; I take it the war hasn't been going on for very long. My friend and I had hoped to arrive a little earlier and avoid the whole sorry mess.'

'You're from the future?' asked Adrian.

'Not the one I'd like,' said Lake. 'We stole Deindum technology to escape and they weren't very happy about that, even though the time-jump I cobbled together from their tech is, apparently, rather

temperamental. We were supposed to arrive when this was a thriving colony world, with more than enough technology to shore up the blasted thing before we jumped back again.'

'So,' said Bernice, 'where you're from, the Deindum...'

'Have won, yes, I'm afraid so,' said Lake. 'There are still people fighting, the resistance movement soldiers on as best it can.'

'Wouldn't this time-jump technology have helped the resistance?' asked Adrian.

'I suppose it would. In which case, they're free to steal their own.'

Cole had finished packing up their equipment, dimmed the glow globe and switched on a handlight. The sudden press of the darkness was startling; Bernice glanced up and gained a little comfort from the shower of stars above.

'I'm still bothered about this distress signal,' said Cole. 'We haven't seen anyone apart from you two since we arrived here, and this planet is supposed to be clean of Deindum, even in our time. We've a scanner, I'll try to get a fix on it.'

'Thanks, but it cut out a couple of hours ago,' said Bernice.

'Yeah, well, it's a good scanner. We stole that from the Deindum too.'

Lake and Cole had set up a camp of sorts inside the three remaining walls of a ruined house. Along one wall sat a couple of thick wooden planks strewn with electronic components. Another bag of equipment lay in the corner half-hidden by a pile of rubble. The remains of a fire sat in the middle of where the fourth wall would've been.

Lake could barely walk with her injured ankle, so Cole had carried her most of the way. He had some medical supplies in his backpack and bound up her ankle while Lake relit the fire. 'I'm sorry we can't offer you anything to eat,' she said to Adrian and Bernice. 'We've nothing but soldiers' ration packs and not many of those.'

Bernice sat down next to Lake, by the fire, grateful for a little warmth and the light. Adrian stayed out by the walls, watching and listening for any sign of life beyond the little camp.

Cole tied off the bandage and turned his attention to the scanner, a small silver box sitting at the end of the nearest plank. 'Just give it a minute to warm up and we should be able to find this distress signal of yours.' The scanner hummed into life. There was a flicker of lights and then the readout began to display figures in a language Bernice didn't recognise.

Cole read the results, then swore. Lake frowned at him.

'What's the problem?' asked Bernice, trying to keep her tone light. 'Your distress signal is about three hours in the past and within thirty metres of where we're sitting.'

Pi thirty metres squared wasn't much, but there were enough

dilapidated buildings, pits and holes in their immediate area that they felt obliged to conduct a search.

Adrian kicked over a plank of wood, revealing nothing more threatening than a shallow dip. 'You really think a big green reptile face is just going to jump out of the ground?'

'It may not be a Deindum,' said Cole, swinging his handlight round to illuminate crumbling brickwork, a pile of twisted metal remains, and the scowl on Adrian's face. 'They've got androids, and not all the people they've conquered are fighting against them.'

Next to the briskly burning fire, Lake sat the scanner in her lap. She'd removed one side and was quickly rearranging components inside it whilst Bernice sat next to her, holding her flashlight so Lake could see what she was doing. 'So, you were an engineer?' asked Bernice as she tried to work out what Lake's swift rearrangement of the scanner's internal gubbins was supposed to achieve.

'I trained as an engineer, yes.' She powered up the scanner and for an instant a smile flickered across her face before something inside the machine sparked and smoke began to seep out of it. Lake swore and tossed it away from her, just before there was a small explosion.

'Not a success, I take it?' said Bernice. 'What were you trying to do?'

'Tighten the focus, pinpoint where the signal was coming from.' She looked up as Adrian and Cole appeared like phantoms from the shadows. 'Nothing to worry about,' she told them. 'Cole, I'm going to need that repair kit you're hiding in your pack.'

As Adrian and Cole went back to their search, Bernice watched Lake as she set about making her repairs. She looked pale and exhausted, dark rings circled her eyes, and Bernice wondered how long she'd been running for.

'You could come with us,' Bernice said. 'The Deindum haven't won here yet. You could help us fight. We need help; a lot of help. Any help. And you know what we're up against.'

Lake looked up at her and shook her head. 'I know very little of this part of the galaxy. I couldn't tell you what the Deindum strategy here will be, or how to defeat them beyond what you already know you need: better weapons.'

Better methods of killing, thought Bernice. 'I wish there was another way,' she said.

'Most soldiers do, eventually.'

'You were a soldier then?'

A small crease appeared on Lake's forehead. 'Yes.'

'What about your own people? Don't you want to help them?'

Lake stared at the scanner, her fingers moved quickly and surely as she removed the damaged components. 'I think I've helped them quite enough already.'

Adrian and Cole were on their second circuit of the area when Adrian paused to examine what he'd thought was the remains of a mining robot. 'That pile of junk looks a bit less... junk-like than the last time I saw it.'

'It's junk, Mr Hall, what do you –' Cole had reached out to grab a piece of loose metal: now he snapped his hand back with a sharp cry.

'Okay, that's weird.'

'What happened?'

'It hurt.'

'Like what? An electric shock?'

'No. I don't know. Try it yourself and see.'

'I'll pass, thanks. Benny! There's something over here you should see!'

'An android,' said Lake as she completed the scan. She gave a rueful smile. 'And I thought the Deindum might just let me go.'

'I've met a Deindum android,' said Bernice, 'and she didn't look anything like this.' The android remains were little more than scrap metal and broken plastics, useless pieces of junk ravaged by centuries of time.

'At the moment, this one's several thousand years old,' said Lake. She tapped the scanner. 'According to these readings it's travelling forwards through time at a tremendous speed. It should reach us in a matter of hours.'

'If it was after you what's it doing so far back in the past?' asked Adrian.

'That time jump is pretty messy technology compared to what the Deindum are used to,' Lake said. 'If this thing followed us closely enough and got caught up in the temporal wake, all sorts of nasty things could happen. Including getting thrown back several millennia before it intended to be.'

'Why are we seeing it here, as a wreck? Why doesn't it just jump here and start killing us all?' asked Adrian.

'Instantaneous time travel requires a great deal of energy and is a lot less accurate. I imagine it wants to conserve its resources,' Lake told him. 'We're seeing it as it would have existed if it stayed in its current time. As the android's present approaches our present, it looks as though it's repairing itself. We're all time-travelling into the future, one second at a time; it's just hit the accelerator. A lot.'

'How long until it gets here?' asked Bernice. She squinted at the mess of metal; with a bit of imagination she filled in a head, arms, legs; all metal bones and plastic organs. Thousands of years after the Deindum were gone (she hoped) this would be what their androids looked like to archaeologists. She blinked and when she looked again

one sharp metal finger seemed to be shining in the torchlight.

‘A few hours.’ Lake gave her a faint smile. ‘I’m sorry; I’m going to need your ship.’

Bernice opened her mouth to object when she felt the barrel of a staser pistol pressed into her back and Cole’s hand pressing down on her shoulder. ‘Oh, well, that’s not very nice.’

Adrian tensed, stepped forward but was dissuaded from doing anything more energetic by a pointed look from Bernice, intended to convey the idea that really there was virtually no way anyone could miss when they had a pistol pressed rather uncomfortably against her spine.

Lake slipped a stunner gun from her boot and nodded at the pistol Adrian had holstered. ‘Take it out, slowly, and drop it on the ground.’

Adrian did as he was told, his furious eyes never leaving her face. ‘Kick it over here,’ she said.

Adrian sent it flying towards her with a lot of dirt and little pebbles. ‘Professor,’ said Lake, ‘are you armed?’

‘No, of course not. What would an archaeologist need with a gun?’

‘I see. If you don’t put your weapon on the ground in the next five seconds, I’ll shoot Mr Hall.’

‘Wall,’ muttered Adrian through gritted teeth.

Bernice glared at Lake then took her staser out from inside her jacket and tossed it at her. Lake took the batteries out of both guns and threw them in the fire. They popped, bubbled and stank.

‘So, what? You’re going to run off in our ship and leave us here to be killed by what will probably be a very annoyed android?’ said Bernice.

Lake shook her head. ‘I need to repair the time jump, not get off the planet. The thing’s only calibrated for a limited area of space/time. I chose this planet because it had a dull, uninteresting sort of history punctuated by a brief colony with sufficiently advanced technology to keep the jump running. Unfortunately it wasn’t quite good enough to get us there.’ She shot an irritated look at Cole before she turned her attention back to Bernice. ‘I don’t need much; there’s a chance your ship may still be operational when I’ve taken what I need.’

‘Great, thanks. Just so you know, this is the last time I help save your life.’

Since Lake’s ankle would slow her down, she stayed at the camp with Bernice while Adrian and Cole went to find her ship. Lake sat down between the android remains and the fire and motioned Bernice to sit down in front of her. Lake’s full attention wasn’t on her: her eyes were glancing towards the android and the readout from her scanner.

‘That’s one of the Deindum’s elite androids, judging by what it’s doing. Top of the range. We haven’t seen many of those yet. They’re

probably expensive to build.'

'So?' asked Lake, her eyes on the scanner, her stunner pointing at Bernice.

'For them to devote one to the job of tracking you down... you must have really upset them.'

'I imagine so.'

'So, what did you do?' Bernice asked, trying to edge closer without looking as though she were moving at all. 'How do you really irritate a big giant lizard head?'

Lake looked up at her. 'I betrayed them.'

Bernice stared at her. 'What? You were working for the Deindum?'

'That's a polite way to put it. Actually, I betrayed my own people, collaborated with Deindum and, having seen the error of my ways, am not quite altruistic enough to let them shoot me as atonement for my sins, so I'm running away.'

'Right,' said Bernice. 'Well, I can see how they'd be a bit annoyed about that.'

'Indeed.'

Bernice frowned. 'Is Cole -?'

'The resistance sent him to assassinate me.'

'Oh.'

'I convinced him otherwise.' She smiled then, and then she laughed, a harsh dry sound. 'It wasn't like it is now. Look at you, all determination and hope and confidence that you might win this. You won't. None of you do. People will fight the Deindum and they will die.'

Bernice felt a burst of anger flare up inside her. 'So we should just roll over and give up? All hail the mighty conquering hordes of the Deindum, our new floating-head overlords!'

Lake laughed again, this time sounding genuinely amused. She was silent for a moment, then she said: 'Well, that's what I did. I was in command of the fleet that intercepted the Deindum ships when they invaded our systems, but I didn't fight them, I ordered our ships to surrender.'

Bernice shook her head. 'Why?'

'I didn't think we could win.'

'You didn't even try.'

'What would that have achieved? It was my job to protect lives, not to fight for the sake of fighting, and I believed the best way to protect the people under my command and the civilians back home was not to fight a useless battle.'

'I take it you changed your mind.'

Lake gave a regretful smile and nodded. 'At first the Deindum seemed... tolerable. Once they had control, they seemed satisfied to

let us live under their watch. But that didn't last: they're a paranoid people and they soon deemed the size of our population to be "unmanageable." When they started getting inventive over how best to manage it, I began passing information to the resistance.'

'That's how you convinced Cole to help you?' asked Bernice.

'Yes. I agreed to give everything I knew to the resistance: security protocols, ship deployments, encryption algorithms, but if I gave them all that then the Deindum would easily be able to trace who'd betrayed them. I wanted out, and the past seemed the safest place to be. I exchanged my information for help in stealing the parts I needed to complete the time-jump. Of course, they didn't know who they were helping.'

'You don't think they might've found a time machine useful against the Deindum?'

Lake shrugged. 'Perhaps, but they know what to do with the information I gave them. Time travel is messy and complicated. I don't want to change things, I just want to hide.'

'Why not join up with the resistance?'

Lake gave a short laugh. 'They couldn't be sure of my loyalties, and I wouldn't blame them. Better to take the information and eliminate the security risk.'

'Cole doesn't seem to agree.'

'No, but then he's sort of honourable, in an old-fashioned way.'

Lake lapsed into silence, and her eyes drifted back towards the android remains. Bernice followed her look. Those metal hands were beginning to look more than a little like metal claws, or metal knives. Sharp, stabby knives. Bernice looked away and cursed her overactive imagination.

Adrian walked as slowly as he could, getting a shove in the back from Cole every couple of minutes to encourage him otherwise. He felt his temper rising and doubted they'd make it to Bernice's ship before he tried for the staser.

Adrian looked over his shoulder and Cole jerked the pistol at him, indicating he should get a move on. Adrian grunted and turned back round. Cole was less than two paces behind him. One hand held the pistol, the other a flashlight. If there was nearby cover, something he could dive behind, in the darkness he might be able to –

The still night air was engulfed by the sound of a ship's engines. Close, no more than a few hundred metres away. Adrian didn't waste his chance. He spun round, arms outstretched and grabbed for Cole's wrists, pushing his arms back as Cole's finger closed on the trigger. A staser bolt fired off to the right, sparking harmlessly against a chunk of concrete.

Adrian squeezed, not quite hard enough to break the bones. 'Drop it,' he growled.

He saw Cole grit his teeth and for a moment he thought the man was going to be stupid. Then the staser clattered to the ground.

Adrian knocked him back easily and scooped up the gun.

Cole gave him a resigned look. 'I suppose you want the flashlight too.'

When Adrian and Cole arrived back at the camp, Bernice realised the situation a split second before Lake, and dived for the stunner. There was an undignified struggle in the dust, too badly lit for Adrian to risk a shot. Bernice had surprised Lake but Lake had been trained to fight, and even with her injury would've won if Bernice hadn't aimed an unsportsmanlike kick at her ankle.

Bernice scrambled to her feet, the stunner in hand. 'Hello, Adrian. I see you've acquired a gun.'

'It was no use anyway,' Cole told Lake.

'Yes, we heard the ship take off,' she said, 'Still, it would've been nice if you'd kept the gun. I'm afraid I've been feeling confessional.'

'I'm not going to shoot you,' said Bernice. 'Even after what you did.' Adrian glanced at her and Bernice shook her head. 'I'll explain later. Who took my ship? It was my ship, I assume; it certainly sounded like her.'

'No idea,' said Adrian, and looked at Cole, who shook his head.

'No-one came here with us. This planet's been deserted for thirty years, that's why we chose it.'

'You sure about that?' said Adrian.

'Well, we won't figure it out like this,' said Bernice.

'So what do we do?' asked Lake.

'Now Benny and I use the BPM's teleport and we leave you here,' said Adrian.

'Adrian -'

'Don't start, Benny. It's what they'd have done to us.'

'Yes, well I'd rather no-one was left here to get killed by that android, if it's all the same to you.' The android had now gained a smooth metallic skin, and looked as though it could start moving at any moment.

'Very enlightened,' said Lake, 'but I'm not coming with you. I've seen what the Deindum do, and I don't want to see it again.'

'You'd rather stay here and die?' asked Bernice.

Lake gave her a cold stare. Cole looked at Lake and shook his head then said, 'I wouldn't. Unity, if there's a choice, I'm leaving.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Of course. So much for your promise.'

'For pity's sake, Unity, if we -'

‘What about the android?’ said Bernice suddenly. ‘That’s Deindum technology – couldn’t you use it to repair your time-jump?’

Lake frowned. ‘It certainly has the parts, but it’s moving out of synch with our timeline. There’s no way to get at it, at least not until it reaches the present. And you’ll need more than a staser pistol and stunner to take it out when that happens.’

‘Those androids aren’t indestructible,’ said Adrian.

‘I’ve a better idea,’ said Bernice. ‘I can get to it now.’

‘How?’ asked Cole.

Bernice raised her hand and wriggled her fingers. ‘See this ring. It’s a time ring, and before you get any ideas about nicking it, it’s mine and it only works for me, but it does mean I can move between two different time streams without ill effects.’

‘I thought you weren’t going to save my life again,’ said Lake.

‘I’m a very forgiving person.’

‘We’ll have to be quick,’ said Lake. According to her scan, the android was no more than a hundred years away. ‘Its time velocity is increasing exponentially as it approaches the present.’

‘You know what you need?’

‘Yes. You know how to use these tools?’

Bernice nodded and flicked on the ion cutter. She worked quickly and efficiently, following Lake’s directions on what to cut, what not to cut and what would be very very bad for everyone if the ion stream went anywhere near it. She tried not to look at the android’s face; its eyes were open and she felt certain they were watching her.

About three hours from their local time, Bernice thought the android looked pretty much neutralised, so many of its insides were cut, chopped, dismantled or had been moved to their own future.

‘Don’t count on it,’ said Lake, about five seconds before something inside the android started to emit a high-pitched beep.

‘That doesn’t sound good,’ said Bernice, but Lake looked relieved. ‘That, Professor, is your distress signal. The two silver connectors to the side of that cylinder should cut it out.’

Bernice followed her directions and, after a moment, the noise stopped. ‘Well, I take it I got the message. How long have we got left?’

‘Half an hour, give or take,’ said Cole.

‘Plenty of time,’ said Bernice and looked at Lake, who nodded. She sat back on her heels and the android jerked, just once, then its hand snapped out and locked around Bernice’s wrist. She tried to pull away but the cold metal fingers were impossibly strong.

‘Don’t panic,’ said Cole.

‘I’m not panicking,’ said Benny. ‘Why would I be panicking? Just tell me how to get this thing off.’

‘We’re going to have to disconnect the limb from the central processor. It’s not complicated, just severing a couple of links.’

‘And what if it decides to grab my other hand while I’m doing that?’ asked Bernice.

‘Then we’ll have a big problem.’

‘I like that you’re saying “we”. Makes me feel like we’re a real team. Ouch!’ Bernice winced. She’d cut the link as directed and the android’s grip had grown tighter. ‘This thing’s going to break my wrist.’

‘Just two more to go,’ said Cole.

The android’s head turned towards Bernice and its wide luminous eyes seemed to grow brighter. ‘Can it see me?’ she asked as she cut the second link. ‘Please tell me it can’t see me.’

‘Of course not,’ said Lake. ‘It’s just...’ She frowned and looked from her scanner to the android then back again. ‘I don’t suppose the Deindum know who you are, Professor Summerfield?’

‘Well, yes, if we’re skipping the false modesty, I suppose they may have heard of me.’ She cut the third link and the android’s hand dropped to the ground. Bernice snatched her arm back and rubbed at her bruised wrist.

Lake pursed her lips. ‘The android recognised you. It might not have been here for me after all.’

It took Lake twenty minutes to finish her repairs to the time jump. By that point the android didn’t look particularly dangerous, but no-one had any intention of staying to find out.

Lake sealed up the time-jump and hoisted her backpack over her shoulder. ‘Are we ready?’ she asked Cole. He nodded, took one final look at the android before he looked over the camp for anything he might’ve missed and then picked up his own backpack.

‘Well,’ said Lake, turning to Bernice, ‘good luck with your inevitable defeat.’

‘Thanks, that’s really inspiring,’ said Bernice. ‘The future can be changed, you know. Look around: it already has been.’

Lake raised an eyebrow. ‘What? All these footsteps in the dust of an old colony? What difference could they possibly make?’

‘You ever heard the one about the butterfly and the hurricane?’

‘I know that hurricanes kill butterflies.’

‘If that android really was a trap for me, then if it weren’t for your help just now, I’d be dead, wouldn’t I?’

Lake shrugged. ‘A lucky day for the butterfly then,’ she said as she took Cole’s hand in hers and activated the jump. They vanished, leaving Bernice and Adrian alone.

‘Shall we be off?’ asked Adrian. ‘It’ll be a tight squeeze in the BPM, but I don’t mind if you don’t.’

Bernice nodded. ‘So who stole my ship? I wouldn’t mind, but I had

some – ouch!’ She waggled her hand.

‘What?’ said Adrian.

‘It’s the time ring. Seems to have caught some back-blast from their time-jump. Feels like it’s gearing up for travel, but there’s next to no power in it – I couldn’t travel more than an hour or therea-‘

And she vanished.

When Adrian returned to the BPM, he found a note pinned to it.

Turns out I took my ship. Sorry I couldn’t hang about, but causality et cetera. Thought it best to leave. Take care of yourself. Bernice.

Adrian put the note in his pocket. ‘You take care of yourself too, Benny.’

Digital Dreams

Oli Smith

I couldn't see.

Readouts streamed across the ocular-diode, a flickering red countdown, sharply focused across the blur of mud that covered my face. Two minutes until planet-rise.

I couldn't see.

A crackle as my hearing re-attuned itself to the sounds of battle, gunfire pattering like raindrops, increasing to a hail, then the sharp snaps of metal striking metal striking metal, over and over and over again. But there were no howls of pain, no hushed orders whispered urgently amongst the surrounding soldiers; the diodes provided the necessary strategic information, any other sound would merely attract attention. And still the Deindum snipers kept firing across the trenches, at silence.

I couldn't see.

I reeled, reaching out a hand in the blackness, searching for proof that I wasn't the only survivor.

'I can't see.'

The first words I had uttered for ten planet-dawns. There was a shift in the earth beneath my feet as a hand grasped my arm and a thick glove wiped across my face, smearing the mud from the visor. Key 47.

He peered at me, searching for confirmation of a problem solved.

I nodded.

He turned and leant back into the wall of the trench, shoulders rubbing against fellow marines as they flinched in time to the gunfire and checked their weapons. I fumbled for my rifle in the liquid mud.

There was a flash of orange, sixteen metres south, and I dropped to my knee to steady myself. Another shell, but further away this time.

First one was lucky, they're firing blind. DM-text scrolled across the top of my vision and I jerked my head in Key's direction.

Understood.

The barrel of the rifle was blocked and I unscrewed the silencer to empty it of mud, hands working quickly out of habit. With the gun checked and ready, I took my place amongst the waiting ranks and peered up into the sky as the diode's red digits reached zero for the eleventh time.

Planet-rise. At last.

Our little moon was falling through space, out of the shadow of the gas giant, and the blue swirl of an alien sun flashed a corona across

the sweep of the planet's flat horizon. A flood of electric blue picked out the textures of the trenches; mud and rocks and leather camo-armour thrown into stark relief as every crease and crevice threw a shadow. This was our signal to move.

At night the Deindum had an advantage; their night-vision technology was far in advance of ours and remained one of the few electrical accessories that was capable of functioning without shielding in the extreme electromagnetic field of the star system. The protective leather cladding on our scanning devices rendered them virtually useless, and during nightfall the only tactical option was to blend into the shadows and wait the enemy out. During the day our limited weaponry still had us at a disadvantage but the odds were tipped further towards even than against.

At least this way we had the element of surprise.

Ready? The message was redundant; the rapidity of the moon's revolution only gave a two-minute window in which the flare of the star was behind us, dazzling the enemy as they switched vision modes. A chorus of DM-affirmatives flared across the diode and, as one, we rose to our feet and turned to face the Deindum, poised for the charge.

3...

2...

HALT

This was new.

Tentatively I raised my head above the edge of the trench, ready to duck the inevitable hail of blind-fire. But it didn't come. Instead, standing in the middle of the scarred and barren wasteland that lay between us and the Deindum snipers, head held high and chin jutting fearlessly, was a woman. A halo of starlight surrounded her slim figure, shining through the linen-like fabric of her clothing as her weight shifted easily from foot to foot. It took a while for our cautious examination to fall upon the object she carried in the crook of her arm.

What is it?

A weapon?

No... a bomb.

Impossible!

It's a football. Key 47's DM carried a hint of smugness. Leather ball, two goals, the colonies *love* it. It appeared that the unseen snipers were as confused as us. The woman tossed her bob away from her face and swept an authoritative gaze across the battlefield.

'Right,' she said; her voice was loud and shocking after the silent conversations that had gone before. 'It looks like I've got your attention.' She rolled the ball across her torso and immediately the still air cracked with the sound of cocked rifles. She held up a hand.

‘Ah-ah! No need for that! No need and no point. Look at you both, you poor soldiers, lost in the haze of Set’s electrical storm. You don’t even know, do you?’ She paused, and then her voice lowered. ‘A lot’s been happening whilst you’ve fought in this bubble.’ She flashed a smile that wore only a façade of humour. ‘My name’s Bernice Summerfield and I’m here to tell you that the war’s over, for now. A ceasefire was called three days ago. All troops are to retreat to their nearest HQ until further orders.’

A stunned silence followed her words and, with a swagger, Bernice Summerfield began bouncing the football between her hands, expertly countering the ragged deflections of the rough ground. ‘Still, no need to rush home just yet,’ she said, slamming the ball into the ground so hard that it arced above her head. ‘Who’s for a kick-about?’ Her question was punctuated by a hollow thud as she swivelled gracefully in the low gravity and booted the ball high into the air.

We looked at each other, disoriented by the new developments.

WTF? Key’s DM scrolled lazily across my vision.

But Summerfield seemed so confident, jogging across the open ground with her eyes fixed on the leather orb, her casual laugh echoing in our ears, that we couldn’t help but believe her.

Evac was tough, and the shuttles wobbled disconcertingly as their engines attempted to override the deadening effects of the star. I clutched at the rough loop of plastic that hung from a main ceiling strut and flexed my legs against the rising G-force as our squad’s transport ascended through the thin atmosphere of the moon. I turned instinctively towards the pilot’s end of the ship and looked out through the windows beyond. They flared with the white heat of atmospheric resistance before fading to reveal the warping pinkish haze of the system’s nebula and the planet whose shadow we had lived in for what seemed like a lifetime. As our distance increased, the horizon of the gas giant began to curve, bending to surround the planet as it shrank to fit inside the glass pane. Then the pilot pulled away and it was gone.

The rest of the squad let go of their hand-grips and began strapping themselves in for the journey. I checked my own harness, making sure the material was undamaged and secure, but chose not to fasten myself into the cubicle just yet. Instead I flexed my limbs in the weightlessness and pushed myself out into the walkway. Key flashed me an enquiring look, but I chose to ignore him as I glided serenely past the soldier and into the shuttle’s cabin.

Its cramped space was disguised by the wide glass panes, and the view of the void that stretched out on all sides made me suddenly lose my orientation. I grasped the pilot’s chair for support and he turned to

face me.

‘Oh, it’s one of you lot,’ he muttered gruffly. ‘Thought the CO had snuck aboard.’ He jabbed a fleshy finger at the comms button a few times, listening to the sharp hiss of static and swearing under his breath. ‘Still a couple of hundred thousand miles ‘til we exit the dead zone.’

‘How long will that take?’

‘Ten minutes. The capital ship’s waiting for us beyond the boundary.’

The swirl of surrounding gas curled and twisted around us as the shuttle rocketed forward, but beyond our slip-stream there was something else. I pointed out the tell-tale tear in the clouds, and the shadow of another ship just ahead, much larger than our own.

‘Another evac ship,’ said the pilot. ‘Looks like one of the civilian transports. It’s late, should be miles ahead of us by now.’

‘Civilian transports? I thought the Set colony was safe?’

The pilot turned in his chair and scratched the bristles on his top lip in amazement. ‘You don’t know, do you?’

‘We’re being recalled under the rules of the cease-fire, so the human colony should be safe unless hostilities resume.’

The pilot’s thin mouth cracked into a hearty laugh and he wiped his eye with a grubby thumb. ‘Oh, my, god. Is that what Summerfield told you? What a joker!’

There was a pause as he composed himself.

‘There’s no cease-fire you bloody idiot! We’re about as far from that as you can imagine. Right now there’s a Deindum battle cruiser heading towards this system from the other side. It’s too large and too fast for us to make anything other than a rude-but-futile gesture at it. You guys wouldn’t have stood a chance – but the top brass were planning to hold that colony if it was the last thing they did, a last stand for this quadrant, until Summerfield turned up.’

‘With the football?’

‘A football? Really? Man, she had a bio-disintegrator field setup! It was deteriorating the leather on your gear, both sides’ equipment was about to be rendered inoperable by the nebula, not to mention the colony’s shielding. Everything was going down, we had to improvise an evac before there was nothing left for us to defend.’ He coughed sharply and nudged the ship away from a mini-meteorite. ‘The football cease-fire was a diversion. She knew the enemy wouldn’t buy it, but it kept ’em on the back foot ’til they realised they couldn’t fight. I heard of Summerfield from some guys who fought the Axis. I heard she was smart, too.’ His voice lowered. ‘Be grateful you got posted out here in the nebula; our other outposts weren’t so lucky.’

There was silence for a few minutes as I absorbed the information,

broken only by the intermittent burst of static as the pilot jabbed at the comms button again. The gas cloud was beginning to thin now and the blackness of space deepened around us.

‘So... the war’s still going?’ I said finally.

‘Well duh,’ said the pilot before emitting a triumphant grunt as the final jab of his thumb produced the high-pitched dial-tone. ‘Anyway, enough chitchat soldier. I’ve got some calls to make.’

He dismissed me with a wave and I floated slowly back to my cubicle. You hear that? I nodded at Key.

Yeah. He replied.

I fingered the rifle that was strapped to my back, sliding it across and under the harness. It felt solid and heavy in my hand, a reassuring certainty.

The war wasn’t over, and I was relieved.

Stella Storia’s gravity was heavy and stifling as I stepped off the landing ramp. The journey home had taken nearly two months, and the majority of that had been spent in hibernation, running through the standard combat routines over and over in my head. The route across the galaxy wasn’t particularly dangerous, nor was the possibility of ambush, but it was healthy to stay alert.

The haze of the sun bleached the tarmac of the landing strips and the clusters of white tents reflected the glow. Their material fluttered in the breeze, casting ripples across the ground like water, and I watched the golden shards move over my boots as I walked out from the shadow of the ships and joined the queue to the lieutenant’s tent.

There were people milling everywhere, and the confused scattering of refugees as they disembarked conflicted with my military training. I was ushered quickly inside the tent as the lieutenant began his speech.

‘Soldiers, welcome home,’ he began. ‘Two months ago the Set system was threatened by overwhelmingly superior firepower, and it was agreed amongst the higher ranks of Earth officials that a tactical withdrawal should be effected and the colony abandoned. I’m pleased to say that the mission was a success and the colonists were evacuated quickly and efficiently with minimal loss of life. Uh...’ It was a hot day and the lieutenant fumbled with the notes in his sweaty hands as he turned the page. ‘Most of you might not be aware of the overall progression of this war,’ he continued, ‘so I’ll be brief. Suffice to say, that although your defence of the colony was exemplary, the tactical situation we are currently in does not lend itself towards the more... conventional battlefield measures.’

What’s he talking about? What’s this got to do with us? I couldn’t see Key in the crowd, but he had obviously spotted me.

‘Instead, rather, it has been decided to launch strategic stealth

attacks across all fronts. This will maximise the range of the damage our forces can inflict, but at the same time requires minimal manpower, which of course means...'

'What's your point?' a voice heckled from the crowd of soldiers, backed up by a chorus of dissent. The Lieutenant peered over his notes disapprovingly.

'Want me to be blunt, soldier?' he growled. 'Then I will. What this means is that, as of today, your services in the aid of humanity's defence against the Deindum are on hold. Indefinitely. Your help was appreciated but it is no longer required until further notice.' He stacked his papers loudly on the lectern before scowling in the direction of the interrupting soldier. 'Happy?' he said finally, before striding from the stage.

I instinctively resisted as the drill sergeant attempted to prise the gun out of my hands. But only a little. I was distracted by the sharp thud as his assistant stuck a small metal cylinder into my arm and then drew it out slowly: when I checked my hands again, they were empty.

'There you go, decommissioned, out of service, all done.' He smiled brightly, before extending his hand. 'Here's your papers, everything you need to know is on here, and the government's allocated you a flat until such time as you can afford your own.'

I shoved the sheaf into my inside jacket pocket without a glance and leant forward, eyes fixed on the rifles behind the sergeant.

'But... what will I do, sir?' I asked.

'Do? Whatever you like man! And you don't need to call me sir either, I'm not your boss any more. You're a civilian now.'

'I'm a soldier.'

'Not unless you're called to enlist again. Now, if you don't mind.' He craned his neck to see past me. 'I've got another twenty of you to see to before the end of today.'

I made no sign of moving and the sergeant sighed, motioning to his assistant to guide me gently out of the tent and away from the line of shuffling figures. 'Don't call us, we'll call you,' he called after me, before muttering something under his breath that sounded like 'Christ almighty.'

The sun was already lowering in the sky and I realised that it was winter. The gleaming domes of Landon were visible now through the fog of the horizon, shining a burnt orange as they caught the light.

I walked slowly towards the opposite end of the landing strip, where the transport terminal was situated. The open space was intimidating, and I felt vulnerable without the comfortingly close barricades and trenches that had made up my life for as long as I could remember. I tried to push such thoughts from my mind and

embrace the sense of freedom. But I was left feeling empty and undefined. I needed further orders; battle plans and strategic evaluations.

I needed to kill. I was good at that.

The government had allocated me a flat in Manchester-4, situated amongst the old Charlottian terraces – endless rows of concrete units set up by the first colonists until they could manage something better, that now lay permanently in the shadow of the domed city above. Up there lived the taxpayers, the law-abiders and the employed. An out-of-work soldier with few prospects was expected to fend for himself amongst the run-down wastes and petty violence that contaminated the streets and alleys around my terrace, probably because he was the only one who could.

The flats were run by an old lady named Mrs Graham, who hid a shotgun above her wardrobe and let her cat run wild across the tenements. She always laughed if I saluted her when passing in the corridor and frowned when I made gun-fingers at her cat, but apart from the occasional exchange of pleasantries upon passing each other in the corridor, we rarely spoke. Instead I would sit alone in my room at the top of stairs and watch the windowsill gather dust as outside the rain would tumble down the window panes in a seemingly endless flood of grime.

Two months passed that way. Every night I would sit at my chair by the window and look up into the heavy grey sky whilst the memories of past conflicts looped over and over in my mind; tactical analyses, training procedures, all replaying against a soundtrack of mud and violence. And when the sun finally rose in the morning, I would walk across the room to the tiny kitchen area and make myself a cup of tea, placing it on the plastic fold-out coffee table to watch the steam fade as it cooled over time.

Then, on the sixty-fifth day;

Are you there?

I'd almost forgotten I had the optical diode.

I arranged to meet Key at the artificial football grounds. They'd been built onto the roofs of some of the newer council blocks, and the fields of deep green Astroturf stretched in a patchwork over the city. The rain had stopped and golden shards of sunlight broke through the heavy black clouds, giving the pitch an atmosphere of the unreal.

Key was hunched in a raincoat on one of the wooden benches that lined the touchline and backed onto the railings that disguised the sheer drop beyond. He'd originally been allocated accommodation down in Villa Viva (a nicer town, smaller, cleaner) but something had happened – he hadn't explained what – that had forced him to move.

I DM'd him a quick '...' as I approached, and he looked up.

'Soldier,' he said. 'You've not changed much.'

'You neither,' I replied as he got to his feet and pulled a couple of objects from beneath his overcoat before shrugging it off completely. He threw one of them to me and I inspected it gingerly.

'It's a rifle, same shape, same weight. Doesn't fire of course, but it feels the same.' He explained.

'What's it made of?'

'Wood.' He made a gesture towards the centre towards the centre of the pitch and started walking. 'Shall we?'

We trained, standing shoulder to shoulder in the middle of the pitch with our wooden rifles. Kneel, stand, shoulder, ready, fire. Kneel, stand, shoulder, ready, fire. The routines we had practiced for so long and so hard in the barracks and battlefields of countless worlds. Kneel, stand, shoulder, ready, fire. We ignored the rain when it finally broke, soaking our bodies and blurring our vision. Our civilian shoes slipped on the Astroturf but still we continued until, nearly four hours later, the local under-17s forced us from the pitch with a chorus of jeers and snide remarks. We trudged back to Key's bench to pick up his coat as the community officer blew his referee's whistle and made our way down to one of the grubby, all-day breakfast diners that stood on a cobbled street corner lined with punctured bin-bags. We ordered tea and let it go cold as we talked.

'She's coming, you know.'

'Who?'

'Bernice Summerfield.'

'The football woman?'

'Yeah, her.'

'Coming where?'

'Here.'

'Why?'

Key leaned forward onto his elbows conspiratorially. 'For us. She's after us. I don't know how, I don't know why, but she's doing something to the guys in our squad. I kept in touch with a couple down in Viva, Bob 15 and Cal 26. They just... vanished. And she was there. Every time.'

'How do you know?'

He leaned back in his plastic chair, it creaked loudly. 'Because she tried to take me. She came to my flat in the middle of the night, but I was ready. There was a fight and I got out of there.'

'Is that why they relocated you?'

Key raised his hands in exasperation. 'I wasn't relocated. I ran, don't you see? She's an agent, the government must be using her. She's good, too good, I tried to report her to Command, figured they

wouldn't be happy to know this was happening, but she'd hacked the databases, our records addresses – all gone; officially, you and I don't exist any more.'

'So what are they going to do about it?'

'They? Nothing, no paperwork means no problem.'

There was a pause. Key continued.

'Can you blame them though? I mean, look at us, we're soldiers, we're made for fighting, that's all we can do, that's all I can think about. I haven't slept, at all, every time I close my eyes it's just the memories of the training, over and over again. It's a waste of money paying our rent and hoping we'll adjust. We'll never adjust. Whoever's employing Summerfield has got the right idea. Better to get rid of us quickly, under the radar, now everyone's forgotten about us.'

I tapped a finger absently against my polystyrene cup, making the tea ripple. 'Do you need somewhere to stay?' I said finally.

I'd never heard Key laugh, and I probably still haven't. But the noise he made then was the closest I reckon he ever came to it. 'Stay? With you? No chance! You just don't get it, do you? She knows where you live. It's just a matter of time.'

'Why did you come then?'

'Thought you had a right to know. If there's anyone you want to say goodbye to, I'd do it now.'

We arranged to meet the next day at the pitch. But when I reached the top of the two hundredth flight and stepped out into the early morning air, Key's bench was empty. I sat down in his spot and waited. But as time passed and the sun rose and fell across the sky, burning long shadows across the fields, I realised that he wasn't coming. And I realised what that meant.

I walked home quickly and barricaded the door with a chair.

It took two days and a lot of knocking by Mrs Graham before I could be coaxed from my room. But once I was out, I stayed out, walking the dingy cobbled streets with my head hunched in my coat, fearful of finding Summerfield waiting for me when I got home, stroking Mrs Graham's cat like a villain in a Bond film. So instead I circled the block, twenty, thirty times a day, watching the store-fronts evolve as the hours ticked by, and ordered tea at midday every day in the café where I'd last seen Key.

It was only a short while later that I was accosted by Mrs Graham at the front door to the terrace just as I was about to embark on my daily walk. She called after me from her door at the back of the hallway and beckoned me over to her.

'Someone dropped this through the letterbox,' she said. 'It's for you.'

She handed me a small white envelope with some reluctance, as if

the event of me receiving any form of communication was cause for suspicion. She was right of course, and hadn't known about my previous meeting with Key.

Inside was a small slip of paper with an address scrawled roughly on one side. That was all. Mrs Graham, who had been eagerly attempting to read over my shoulder, tutted in disappointment and shuffled back inside her apartment, leaving me to ponder this latest development alone.

I'd go, of course. I had to.

It was a café. Not the same kind of greasy-spoon I had frequented over the last week, more an upmarket coffee bar, situated just beyond the boundary of Manchester-4's great dome and across the road from a large department store selling summer dresses at forty percent off.

I sat down awkwardly in one of the trendy armchairs and sank into the worn cushion. I hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary about the place, and the letter hadn't specified a time. If it was a meeting I'd been summoned to I could have been hours or even days early.

'Can I get you anything?' One of the waiters appeared behind me, notepad and pen in hand. I reached across to a menu on the nearby table to take a cursory glance, but stopped the moment I saw the waiter's face.

'Key?'

The waiter started. 'Uh, yes. How did you know my...'

'We were supposed to meet at the football pitch a week ago. I thought they'd got you.'

Key tapped the notepad with his biro nervously. 'I don't think that was me, sir. I've never seen you before in my life.' He looked around before whispering conspiratorially. 'Look, if you could just order something, it's my first week here and the manager was reluctant enough to take me on as it was.'

I stared at him incredulously before composing a brief DM and flicking it in his direction. But the message bounced.

'I'll have a tea,' I said finally. Key turned. 'Wait, scrap that, I think I'd better just go.'

I stood up, grabbing my coat from the arm of the chair and pushing against the glass front door of the café. Key stood there, watching me.

'Well, goodbye then,' I said.

Key shrugged.

I opened the door and left.

Summerfield was standing waiting for me on the other side of the street.

If I'd seen her an hour ago I would've run. Now, I just wanted to know what the hell was going on. I strode over to her. She didn't

flinch.

‘What are you doing?’ I shouted, moving to snatch at her lapels, but she sidestepped me neatly.

‘Saving your lives,’ she replied. ‘Again. Look at your friend; he’s got a job, a wage, an allotment. It’s more than you’ve got; it’s more than you were going to have even if he’d continued to meet you.’

‘I have a life.’

‘What, training on a football pitch with a wooden gun? Sitting alone in your room with about five hundred cups of cold tea? Why do you even make those anyway? To blend in? You know you can’t drink them.’

‘You’ve been to my flat?’

‘Of course I’ve been to your flat!’

I turned and started walking hurriedly down the street.

‘Don’t you want it?’ Bernice shouted after me. ‘Don’t you want to know how it feels to be able to do something else?’

I ran.

I couldn’t go home, obviously, but I didn’t know where else to go. So I went to the football pitch, climbing the stairs two at a time. She knew I’d come here, but at least it was open, harder for her to pin me down.

A faint drizzle hung in the air as I stood in the centre spot and turned to face the door to the stairwell. A flash of regret crossed my mind as I remembered the worlds I had fought in, the epic conflicts that had raged around me, and here I was facing my end on a football pitch in Manchester-4, where even the weather refused to be dramatic.

I was surprised at how little time it took Summerfield to arrive. Her black hair was slightly bedraggled and the white cotton of her blouse was marked with pinpricks of drizzle. She put her hands in her trouser pockets and looked around, admiring the view. When she spoke her voice was quiet, wistful.

‘I knew you’d come here. You’re familiar with it. Good for a strategic defence. That’s how you think isn’t it?’

I shrugged. ‘I’m a soldier.’

‘You don’t have to be.’

‘It’s what I was built for.’ I held up my hand: it glinted in the hazy sunlight, each metal finger reflecting the gap in the clouds.

‘I can change that.’ She looked around. ‘I can stop you looking at this view and imposing a battlefield. I can let you play football instead of drill. I can let you sleep instead of remember.’

‘But why can’t I do that already?’

Bernice sighed. ‘Because there’s no room; your hard-drive’s full. It was a problem the army fixed on later models, doubled the size so

they could adapt.'

I avoided her gaze, suddenly self-conscious. I didn't like people talking about how I worked.

Bernice sighed. 'I'm sorry but it's true, your make had been in service so long, in the end the army simply moved the outdated models to the front line, allocated them suicide missions, expected them to die in service. That's why your squad was posted on Set, because you weren't supposed to come back alive. I didn't know that.'

'And if you had, you wouldn't have saved us?'

'I'd have done exactly the same. It just explains why nobody else had done it first.'

'You should have let us die. I wasn't meant for this.'

Bernice reached out her hand. 'No one should die. Let me help you.'

I looked at her piercing eyes, the golden glow of the light refracted through the drizzle on her skin.

'There's no time for this.' Bernice looked at her watch. 'I should have been home six hours ago. This is your last chance, I can't come back. Don't make me leave you.'

A pause.

'Please.'

The sense of urgency Bernice had displayed on the pitch was forgotten – or hidden – as we walked quietly up the old wooden stairs to my flat, stepping on the faded carpet so as not to alert Mrs Graham to our presence. I closed the door to my room gently behind us and dropped the latch before producing a fold-out chair for Bernice to sit on as I cleared a space on the floor.

She waited whilst I emptied the stained mugs into the sink one by one and listened to the tea gurgle in the pipes as I stacked them carefully on top of each other. When there was finally enough room for us both, I lay down on the ragged wood floor and nodded to Bernice.

She knelt down beside me, producing a small metal box with a touchscreen and a pair of trailing wires, then gently pressed against the side of my temple. I heard the maintenance panel pop open and felt the input jacks slot smoothly into place.

It was just a case of erasing the right bits, she'd said; battle training, tactical analysis, the things that had filled my every thought for as long as I had lived, and I felt slightly indignant about how quickly she was able to isolate the relevant data.

'Why didn't they do this when they discharged me?' I said.

'Because officially, it's impossible to erase this stuff. Officially.' When she announced that she was ready to press delete, I grabbed her wrist.

‘Will I remember Key?’ I asked.

She looked down at me with sad eyes. ‘Do you want to?’

I thought about it for a second.

‘No,’ I said eventually. ‘No I suppose not.’

She nodded, and pressed the button.

There was a flash inside my head.

Then my mind emptied.

And I dreamed.

Interlude

Eddie Robson

The thing sat in the middle of the floor of the flight deck, recounting in detail how an innocent family had died needlessly and in pain. Hass sat in the corner, vaguely listening, failing to care and feeling guilty at his failure to care. He had tried going into other rooms, but there was no point: the thing just followed him, even through locked doors.

Soon they would be at this thing's point of origin, and Hass would try to help. This might allow him to shrug off the guilt. Of course, this was what the thing wanted him to do, but it was also what Hass wanted to do. He resented the thing for not trusting him to do it without being pressured and harried like this.

Hass had picked up the distress call two days ago. At first it seemed to be a simple signal, but on closer inspection turned out to be a program which installed itself on the flight console before Hass, or the ship's software defence systems, could stop it. It reprogrammed the ship's course and locked the controls.

Hass knew that all this was going on because the program explained what it was doing as it went along. It had created a small icon – which, he noted, did not look entirely unlike a caricature of himself – and this icon stood on the console and talked to him in his own language. It apologised for what it was doing (though Hass reflected to himself that this made it no less illegal – it could, in fact, be interpreted as an act of war) and detailed why.

This was not a trick. It was a genuine, desperate bid for assistance. The distress call was from a planet called Krowmon. Hass had never heard of it, but then he was a long way from home – from any of his homes. Krowmon was under attack by the Deindum. The icon begged Hass not to attempt to undo what it had done to the ship. Hass was unfamiliar with the craft and could not have done so even if he wanted to, but he agreed.

This, however, was not the end. The icon then remained present and narrated the awful experiences through which the people on Krowmon were going. It was unclear what the Deindum wanted, but hordes of them had landed and started interrogating people. They had not done this patiently, but had detained people in droves and used various methods of torture. Meanwhile, all of the planet's records, official and private, were acquired and absorbed. It had quickly become clear that there was something the Deindum wanted to know about this world, they didn't trust the inhabitants to tell them the

truth about it, and they didn't care who they killed to get the answer.

Hass was sickened and dismayed, though hardly surprised.

The icon continued. Its report, combining anecdotal accounts, overviews and death tolls, was endless. In places the icon seemed to repeat itself, although this might have just been because the report itself had only one tone.

Unwillingly, Hass gradually found himself unable to care about each story. In the beginning he offered responses, comments on the situation that was being described to him – but he stopped after a while when the process became mechanical. The icon detected this and reacted by describing the conflict in more visceral detail.

Hass asked the icon to stop. But it only stopped for as long as Hass himself was talking. Then it started again. At one point Hass detected a bleak irony in one of the icon's accounts and before he could think what he was doing, he laughed. The icon stopped for a moment and gave Hass what seemed to be a cold glare, though it might just have been confused by his response. Then it continued.

The icon's small, mournful voice continued into the night, and Hass could never quite tune it out. Death. Destruction. Suffering.

Background noise.

As the ship neared Krowmon, Hass tried to clear his mind and feel afresh what he had felt when the icon had first detailed the situation to him: the fear, the anger, the righteous indignation. Paradoxically, in order to do this he had to ignore the icon as it supplied fresh details. Hass had no idea what he was going to do when he got there – he was hoping some other, larger, better-equipped vessels would have been similarly ensnared by the distress call – but he was determined to do what he could.

If matters were extremely bad, he did have an option open to him.

Suddenly the icon stopped talking. Hass looked up and saw that it was still present and functioning, but had fallen silent. He also realised that the ship had stopped.

'Are we here?' asked Hass.

'Invalid query,' said the icon. 'But thank you for coming.'

Hass stood and moved over to the main monitor. The screen was filled with debris. It was impossible to see the planet clearly. The controls had been released. Hass compared the image on the screen to the charts, hoping he could navigate through the debris manually.

Then he compared co-ordinates and realised that where the ship was now should have been the centre of the planet.

There were no signs of other ships. No signs of anything. The field of debris was over sixty thousand miles across. The planet's four moons seemed to have spun away. The ship's comms were entirely

silent.

As pieces of debris hit the ship, they dissolved. Something had totally undermined their structure. It took little pressure to make them fall apart.

Hass sat at the flight console. The icon reappeared there and said, 'I will help you if I can.'

Hass re-set the ship's course back towards Maximediras. Then he turned to the icon and asked it to tell him what this world had been like before the Deindum came. And the icon, with pride in its voice, told him.

The Empire Variations

Niall Boyce

Bev Tarrant was dog-tired, and her knee hurt like hell.

Every day, hundreds of refugees arrived at the Braxiatel Collection with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Providing shelter was not a problem – at least, not yet – but these people needed more than a roof over their heads. They all needed feeding, for one thing. Then there was the matter of medical treatment. Bev had managed to assemble a team of doctors and nurses to dress wounds, to set limbs and wings and tendrils, to amputate what they could not save, and to provide a few words of comfort to the dying. But if she didn't sort out the supply situation soon, those words of comfort were the only things they would be able to offer.

Dealing with the missing was another one of her duties. Officially, she kept a list of all those who had come to the Collection for shelter, so that new arrivals could check to see if their loved ones had made it. Unofficially, she had long since lost track.

The refugees had lined the wall of the Arrivals Hall with photographs of the disappeared. *Have You Seen This Person? Please Get in Touch. Much Missed. Much Loved.* Sometimes Bev walked past the photographs late at night. In the flickering candlelight, the faces looked back at her with something like reproach.

Then there were the other, more subtle effects of the war. History itself was splintering, timelines breaking off and reforming, the aftershocks rippling out in every direction. The Collection itself was affected, whole buildings changing their structure or location or even, on one deeply alarming occasion, disappearing altogether. She noticed subtle changes in herself, too, her scars shifting in size and place, for example, or the fact that she could now clearly recall at least three slightly different versions of her childhood.

Two things, however, remained constant: the pain from her knee, and the fact that she couldn't sleep a wink.

There wasn't much she could do about the first problem. Even if she had been able to access the best surgeons in the universe, the human knee was such a poorly-designed joint that there were very few shortcuts to fixing it. Artificial arms were a walk in the park by comparison. It would heal eventually, but she would just have to put up with it for the foreseeable future.

As for the second issue, however, she had a plan.

There was one work in the Collection that was the perfect cure for

insomnia.

Bev had stolen it once, back in her thieving days. It had been a real challenge: a piece of conceptual art from twentieth-century Earth. Whilst it was comparatively easy to filch the physical object – in this case, a film – it was much harder to steal the concept.

In the end, she had resorted to destroying all the other copies of the film, erasing its details from computer databases, tearing and deleting pages from every book she could find that mentioned it, and wiping the memory of anyone other than her employer who knew anything about it. It had taken five years before the theft was complete.

The piece had subsequently spent a couple of decades in private hands before the Universal Art Crime Division had worked out it was missing, tracked it down, verified that it was indeed art, and liberated it. Bev hadn't actually minded too much when her work was undone: the only frustrating thing about pulling off a theft like that was you couldn't tell anyone about it.

And here was the film now, tucked away in a dark and quiet side-room of the Collection. Its infopane read:

Empire / Film (B&W, Silent, 8hrs 5 mins approx)

Andy Warhol / New York, USA, Earth / 1964 CE

Warhol recorded this static shot of the Empire State Building in New York on the night of the 25th-26th July 1964 between 20:06 and 02:42. He was positioned in the offices of the Rockefeller Foundation, on the 51st floor of the nearby Time-Life Building.

This film is shown on a continuous loop.

If this doesn't send me to sleep, thought Bev as she pulled up an armchair in front of the screen, *nothing will*.

Nothing happened. Nothing whatsoever happened.

The sun sank and the lights came on in the skyscraper. They twinkled in the Manhattan night. Sometimes, when the reels changed over, Bev caught a glimpse of a ghostly figure reflected in the window: either Warhol himself, immaculate in his platinum fright wig, or another man she didn't recognise, presumably the cinematographer.

The film, she realised, was playing at the wrong speed. It should have been slowed down – that was how it was meant to be shown.

What difference did it make, though? The film was still boring. Or no not boring. That was the wrong word. More hypnotic: watching it was like reciting a mantra. Her eyes became heavy, and as the building was plunged into total darkness, she fell into a deep and refreshing sleep.

The next day brought a fresh wave of refugees: the Cat Women of

Pyrrh. They had been exposed to a cloud of toxic dust, and needed to be immersed in cold water. The medics prepared one of the swimming pools for the purpose, but the Cat Women demanded heavy sedation before they went in. When the team ran out of tablets, they resorted to flinging the Cat Women in forcibly. Several of the staff sustained extremely nasty scratch injuries in the process, and the Cat Women were deeply offended when Bev arranged for her employees to have tetanus injections.

In the midst of this chaos, though, Bev felt strangely calm. It was as if part of her was far away, on a warm July night in New York, looking at the lights of one of the most famous buildings in history. She thought about the time she had stolen *Empire*. Back then, she had wondered why anyone would bother making a film of a building, a film virtually no one would watch in its entirety.

The reason seemed obvious to her now. Nothing lasts forever, that was why. Those things you take for granted, like a familiar building you walk past every day, or a good night's sleep, or the people you love: they could all vanish in an instant.

That night, Bev brought a blanket, some snacks, and a mug of hot chocolate to the Warhol room. She made herself comfortable just as the loop of film began to run again.

This time, however, she felt uneasy watching the movie. As the lights came on and the darkness thickened around it, the building looked – there was no other way of putting it – like a target.

It was ridiculous, she knew, this sense of mounting dread. But it was impossible to shake off. Her palms were damp with sweat, and she felt her heart pounding faster and faster in her chest. What was going on? Was this a panic attack? Why couldn't she just pull herself together and –?

Then she saw it.

At the top right hand corner of the screen – so indistinct that at first you could have mistaken it for a flaw in the film – was a glowing globe of light. It descended slowly and circled the building, running some sort of searchlight up and down the mast, and across the windows.

It hovered away to one side and moved out of shot.

Bev sat forward in her chair.

The globe flew back into view, straight into the body of the skyscraper and out of the other side. Tiny streaks of flame jetted out of the windows, and the walls buckled. Clouds of thick smoke poured into the sky, as the globe began to circle again, tentatively, experimentally, curious to see what effect its assault would have.

Then, suddenly, the mast of the Empire State Building shot out of

sight, like a plunger pressed down firmly by an invisible hand.

The building collapsed rapidly beneath it, layer upon layer pancaking until nothing was left but an illuminated cloud of smoke and dust.

The globe glowed more brightly, swooping and diving, carrying out a victory dance. Bev stood up from her chair in shock. Her knee sent a warning dart of pain, but she ignored it. All of her anger was focussed on the circle of light leaping and weaving defiantly on the screen in front of her.

As if it had realised it was being watched, the globe came to an abrupt halt.

It stayed perfectly still for a second, before moving towards the camera, picking up speed as it went.

Just before it hit, and the screen went blank, Bev thought she caught a glimpse of the skull beneath the Deindum's reptilian skin.

Bev checked the infopane. The text had changed.

Title Unknown / Film (B&W, Silent, 1hr approx)

School of Andy Warhol? / New York, USA, Earth / 1964 CE

This piece, a static shot of the Empire State Building, has the distinction of being the last work of art created in New York before its destruction on the 25th of July, 1964. The film was recovered from the remains of the city, and reconstructed by a team of experts.

Bev staggered out of the room. She slumped against the wall outside, and slid to the ground. How far into the past had the Deindum gone? And how much damage had they done? She had no way of finding out.

Wait a minute. Of course she had.

Bev pulled herself to her feet, and shook her head to clear it. Then she set off down the corridor, to search for signs of the Deindum in the rest of the Collection.

In the first room Bev came to, there was an immense crack running the length of the floor. In the second, there was nothing but a light going on and off. The infopanels in both were out of order, and she wasted several minutes wondering if she had been looking at art or simply structural damage.

In the third room, she found what she was looking for. It was a glass tank, filled with murky formaldehyde. A giant rotting lizard head hung suspended in the centre. The infopanel told her that the piece was by Damien Hirst, and dated from 1992 CE. It was called *The Physical Impossibility of the Deindum in the Mind of Someone Living*.

Bev moved on to the early twentieth century, expecting to find

gigantic reptile heads melting into nightmare Dali landscapes, fractal skulls with savage teeth descending Duchamp's staircase, Deindum energy blasting the humans and animals in Picasso's *Guernica*. Yet there was nothing.

She went back further still, but there were no hostile intruders lurking in the undergrowth of Monet's garden, no sumptuous portraits of elegant alien overlords by John Singer Sargent.

As far as one could tell from the Collection, Bev thought, the Deindum had not travelled back beyond the nineteen sixties. Why was this? Surely they were capable of it. Had Bev and her friends overestimated their enemy? Or had they only witnessed the preliminary raids, a few lightning attacks so the Deindum could size up the opposition in preparation for something really big?

Reluctantly, Bev returned to the Warhol room. It was like watching the TV news reports of a disaster: after ten minutes or so, you knew all you really needed to know. But you felt you had to see the footage again and again nevertheless. Perhaps part of you hoped that some sort of meaning would emerge, or even that it would all turn out to be a hoax, or a big mistake.

The film was looping back to the beginning as she sat in the chair and began to watch.

There was the tower, so imposing and yet so fragile in the evening light. And there was the Deindum. Circling stealthily, like a predator stalking its victim. Bev leaned forward, waiting for the inevitable, not wanting it to happen, but simultaneously needing it all to be over and done with.

It was then that she noticed the other object, just a little distance above the Deindum globe. It was small and dark, and moving very quickly, if erratically, through the sky. It was hard to tell from this distance, but Bev could have sworn it was a biplane. Just as she registered this, it dived sharply and smacked straight into the globe. The biplane crumpled and slid off, plunging to the ground below. Bev thought she saw something – a tiny black speck – leap from the falling wreckage and land on the globe.

The globe dipped and weaved: but there was nothing smooth or self-assured about its flight path now. It looked drunk, or sick. It wobbled up and down rapidly, as if trying to shake something off. Then it broke away from the Empire State Building, and flew at the camera.

As it loomed larger and larger, Bev thought she caught sight of a black mark spread across the surface, something she thought was damage from the impact with the biplane. It was only when the globe was almost at the window, and she could make out the head within snapping and snarling like a cornered beast, that she realised the dark

patch was a person. A person piloting the weakened globe like a bucking bronco. A person clinging on for dear life, but appearing remarkably relaxed as she did so.

A person who still looked fabulous in a catsuit.

Bernice. Bev thumped the arm of her chair with enough force to send her half-empty mug of hot chocolate flying. Bernice had turned up here from Stella Storia a couple of weeks ago, spent a few hours with Peter, then vanished with little explanation of her intentions.

The camera stayed perfectly static right up until the point of impact. Then it was thrown backwards, giving her a glimpse of the ceiling tiles before it came to rest on its side. Someone picked it up and set it right on its tripod: only now, it was looking at the interior of the office.

The place had been thoroughly trashed. The Deindum was bouncing off the walls like a wasp caught in a jar, whilst Bernice flung lamps, chairs, fragments of desk, pot plants, anything, in its direction. And just to the right of the frame stood a man in a white wig, sunglasses, a striped top, skinny jeans and ankle boots. Warhol: he was perfectly still, as if he wasn't the least bit worried about the debris that flew around him. He was covering his mouth with two fingers of his left hand, in that characteristic way that made him look simultaneously preoccupied and bored, vacant and enigmatic.

As Bev watched, he seemed to remember himself. He turned to face the camera, and mouthed something.

'Ohhh,' she lip-read. 'This is in-tense.'

Warhol shaded his eyes and turned back to the fight. The Deindum was backed into a corner and evidently losing power fast: its movements were more sluggish, and its jaws were grinding open and closed in a feeble attempt to appear fierce. Bernice somersaulted up to it, and as she did so, Bev noticed two spikes shoot out of the heels of her boots.

Retractable force field-piercing stilettos. Typical.

Bernice punctured the globe with a well-aimed kick: the hole she made warped and expanded, little crackles of energy dancing around the rim. It was like watching a bubble burst in slow motion. Its protective layer removed, the wounded Deindum lay slumped on its side, flopping like a fish out of water. It looked more pathetic than terrifying, and Bev could almost feel sorry for it. Almost.

Bernice stood over the Deindum. She was so absorbed in watching it that she didn't notice Warhol creeping up behind her. He brushed the wig away from his sunglasses and raised his fist to his mouth, clearing his throat, trying to be noticed. Bernice continued to ignore him: the reptilian head imploded into a tiny point of intense white light before winking out of existence.

Warhol tapped her on the shoulder. Bernice swung around so quickly that Bev barely registered the movement. It was almost like a jump-cut: in an instant Bernice had drawn her gun and was glaring at Warhol, her lip curled contemptuously as she told him to freeze. Warhol, meanwhile, had lowered his shades and was looking her up and down. He smiled shyly, and gestured in the direction of the camera.

Bernice glanced over her shoulder, and looked into the lens. Her face softened. She replaced her gun in its holster, walked over to the camera so she was in close-up, and blew a kiss. She turned the camera around so that it pointed in its original direction, facing the Empire State Building. It was quite dark outside now, and the lights were on. If the skyscraper were a person, Bev thought, she would have said it looked a little shaken, and perhaps more aware of its own mortality. But, like the timeline she had just witnessed unfolding, it was still more or less intact.

Bev kept watching, but nothing else happened. As the lights of the Empire State went out, and the building became nothing but a slightly darker space against the general blackness of the night, she found herself drifting off. She slept like a baby, and her knee gave her no trouble whatsoever.

When Bev awoke, the screen in front of her was blank: she waited a couple of minutes, but the movie failed to start. Malfunction, she thought. Put it on the to-do list.

As she got up to leave the Warhol room, she noticed something on the wall behind her chair, something she hadn't seen before.

It was a silver life-size print of Bernice. Or rather, of Bernice and Bernice: two of them, side by side, shooting from the hip with a gunslinger's sneer.

The infopane read:

Double Bernice / Screenprint Andy Warhol / New York, USA, Earth / 1964 CE

Bev looked at it for a moment before breaking one of her own rules. She deactivated the security shield that protected the picture from damage, then leaned in and planted a kiss on both of the silver faces.

'Here's looking at you,' she said.

Then she walked out of the room, and back into the war.

Past Caring

Richard Dinnick

The mountain looked like something from a horror film. It was dark and rocky with an irregular outline of jagged outcroppings. A small flying vehicle approached the granite slopes on a pre-determined course.

In the aft section of the snub-nosed craft sat Benedic Haine. He was in a line of chairs facing an identical row opposite. All the seats were taken and all contained members of the elite who worked at the facility.

A slight bout of turbulence caused the personnel carrier to wobble a little but this caused no alarm. Why should it? Haine merely smiled passively at the woman opposite and then stared out of the window behind her as the vehicle made its final approach to the docking port.

The great hangar had been blasted from the rock face and was as far as any flying craft could go at the complex. Security wasn't so much a necessity as a formality. Nothing unexpected could possibly occur here. Not here.

With a hiss of stabiliser rockets firing, Haine felt the ship touch down on the hangar floor and within moments the crew access door opened and a uniformed member of the clerics informed them needlessly that they had arrived and may disembark. As he made his way forward, the woman bobbed her shaven head at him in deference.

'Live for tomorrow,' murmured Haine beatifically as he passed.

The cleric smiled broadly. Such a blessing from a Herald would stand her in good stead for a few days at least.

Leaving the hangar behind, the Herald made his way down a silvery corridor lit by candles and stopped at a thick door that was barring his way.

An Usher rested in an alcove beside it. The humanoid robot was another inessential precaution. It stood, motionless, like a bronze statue: only the steady, pale blue glow from its face visor told Haine it was ready to strike him down should his credentials prove unacceptable.

A light smile brushed the Herald's lips as he entered a seven-digit pass code into the keypad beside the door. For the merest second nothing happened and then a steady clunking told him that the complex lock system was releasing the integral bolts that usually kept the door firmly closed.

'Welcome to the Divine, Herald Haine.' The computer voice was soft

and welcoming; the tones of an educated woman – the very essence of the Divine itself.

The door swung open and Haine stepped through into the purity-lock. Here there were no candles; lighting instead provided by bioluminescence pumped through thick cables recessed into the ceiling. Immediately he started removing his grey robe and then moved on to strip his underwear off. He placed all his clothing in the incinerator and waited while the outer door sealed itself once more. The moment the last bolt clunked into place, the incinerator destroyed his clothing. Their remains, along with any lingering odour, were sucked away by a vacuum system and Haine was now ready for the irradiation shower.

Haine's body was gently caressed by beams of invisible energy. It tingled slightly and he always found it a most pleasurable sensation. And so it should be. This was his preparation for serving the Divine.

At last he could don the simple white garments of the Herald and enter the inner sanctum. Another door swung open and Haine stepped out onto a walkway of meshed steel.

No matter how many times Haine saw the sight before him it always left him in total awe. It was beautiful. Simply beautiful. The vast, round cavern was a mass of silver machinery with several probes and control towers that extended from the circumference towards the centre. Here a huge ball of soft light hung in the air, shining with a mesmerising iridescence. He bent in the form of supplication and whispered several mantras before rising again and making his way around the Divine to his sanctum.

The small suite of rooms was simple and unadorned. Nothing could compare to the splendour of the Divine anyway, so why bother? Instead it was designed for functionality. His chamber housed a metal desk that protruded from the far wall and contained an in-built computer system. A posture-memory chair was magnetised to the floor and on the wall in front of the desk was a wide window that gave onto the cell. To the right was a small stairwell that led to the cell door and behind the chair another door that led to a small bathroom for his ablutions.

Haine entered, sealed the outer door and settled himself into the chair. He operated the microphone, which detached itself from the desk and floated into the air, positioning itself a handbreadth away from his mouth. Then he operated a button on his console and the glass in the cell window changed from smoked to clear.

There, curled on the floor, was the prone shape of a woman. Her clothing was charred and scorched. Her black hair was similarly dishevelled and she was clearly unconscious.

Haine's usual confident demeanour slipped from him as he hesitantly spoke into the microphone.

‘Report,’ he said. But his throat was suddenly dry and he needed to restate the request.

The soft voice of the Divine filled the room. ‘The subject arrived via the Divine. As senior Herald the Divine Synod routed her to your cell for confession.’

Haine rose from his chair and went round his desk to press his face against the window. The people who came to Haine for confession were brought in by Ushers. They had been invited there and came willingly. For the most part. This was unforeseen – and that scared Haine. Nothing was unforeseen. ‘She arrived... via the Divine?’ he repeated. ‘What does that mean?’

‘The subject was captured by the Divine in the time vortex.’

This was too much! ‘Impossible!’ Haine laughed. ‘Synod has made a mistake. She must be a past-carer. A sinner. How could she possibly...’

‘The Synod does not make mistakes,’ the voice of the Divine said. Although the sweet tone of her voice was unwavering, the threat did not escape Haine’s attention. He was, after all, quite used to making them himself.

‘No,’ he replied. He continued to stare at the woman in the cell. ‘Of course not.’ As he watched, his prisoner began to stir. Like a drunk awakening from night of debauchery, she lifted her head, bleary-eyed, swallowing to get some saliva in her mouth.

She looked around the cell with narrowed eyes, the light causing her some discomfort. Her gaze halted on the window and the face beyond it. ‘Welcoming committee?’ she croaked.

Haine frowned. Her voice sounded familiar. He shook his head. Ridiculous.

‘Broadcast to cell,’ he commanded the roving mike. ‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘How did you get here?’

The woman’s eyes opened some more as she became accustomed to the harsh cell strip-lights. She pulled herself into a sitting position, one knee tucked up under her chin. She massaged her shin and shook her head. ‘My name is Professor Bernice Summerfield,’ she said. ‘How did I get here? A ring which enables me to travel in time, which I appear to have mislaid, irritatingly. Maybe I should get a bigger, more immediately visible time machine.’

‘Why did you come?’ asked Haine.

‘I’m fighting a war and I’m looking for weapons. We’re a touch out of our depth, you see, and in my experience the early civilisations of the galaxy left some pretty big and tasty weapons – indistinguishable from magic, you know the sort of caper – just lying around to gather dust and mythology. I wouldn’t have stolen them – just... borrowed them.’

But Haine wasn’t listening. He was shaking his head. He backed

away from the window, not quite daring to look away. 'Screen,' he said. The glass in the window immediately returned to its smoked, opaque state. 'Hey!' The woman protested.

Haine spoke again, but not to her. 'Cut broadcast to cell.'

Now he could no longer see or hear the woman, he collapsed into his chair. He was shaking. The idea that she had come via the Divine was acceptable to him now. It was the fact that she spoke with the same voice as the Divine he found hard to comprehend.

In the dark of the cramped, subterranean vents, two figures emerged over the lip of an outcropping, the lights on their safety helmets playing over the uneven cave floor.

As they scrambled onto the comparative safety of the ledge, the taller one spoke.

'A tricky climb.' He had a deep, mellifluous voice. Really, he should have been an actor instead of a knight, thought his companion. 'You did well.'

Tomast Poinder accepted his mentor's hand and felt himself lifted the last few feet onto solid rock.

He bobbed his head.

'Not too bad,' he conceded.

They had set out from their base of operations in the city of Clavista three days ago and had moved only at night and only on foot.

'We are knights of the Harvest. We reap as we sow. We till the soil of time and await the pasture of summertime. We await the Harvest.' Galhid smiled. Knights of the Harvest were like the commandoes of old; something in which Galhid took great pride.

'What I don't understand...' said Tomast.

'Yes?' sighed Galhid, staring at the display on his handheld tablet.

'The rope bridge. Across the rock cleft. We would never have got to the foot of the mountain without it.'

'Indeed we would not.' Galhid turned the tablet lengthways to get a better perspective on the map he was examining.

'So how did you know it was there? How did you know it could be raised using that winch?'

Galhid turned to Tomast. 'You don't understand, do you? We have been planning today for a very long time. A very long time. Ever since the Queen of the Harvest was taken from us. And today, we avenge her death. Today, my friend, you and I will destroy the Divine.' He turned back to the cave mouth and started walking. 'Even if it's the last thing we do.'

Bernice scratched the back of her head. What the hell was going on? This was supposed to be a quick, in-and-out job. Easy, no complications.

The records were vague, but suggested some kind of God-device-type technology was here. Ruined city. Temple. That sort of thing. Someone just needed to steal in and have a look. No need to assemble a team. Bernice could do it on her own. Yeah, well, Bernice was certainly on her own now. And with an extremely nervous gaoler it seemed.

‘Hello?’

Nothing.

‘I’m not going to hurt you.’ Not if you’re nice to me. Not if you just let me go and don’t do unspeakable things to me. ‘I’m not really in a position to hurt you, anyway,’ she added.

There was a pause. Benny stood, wincing with the effort. Then she cried out as her leg collapsed in pain. She felt so weak; a strange, almost out-of-body experience. She started to check over the rest of her body, applying pressure to arms and ribs, her head, feet, hands...

She needed to find the time ring, but first she needed to find the energy to find the time ring. How could she feel so incapable of doing anything? While her mind seemed to be working fine, her body had taken on all the attributes of an arthritic old crone.

Then she heard the voice. She felt too groggy at first to be sure but then as it kept talking, recognition had crept up on her like an icy draft under a door. It was her voice.

‘The Herald has requested that I proceed with the confession for the time being.’

Bernice cocked her head on one side. ‘Confession? What am I supposed to have done?’

‘I am afraid I do not understand the question.’

‘Confessions are usually admissions of guilt. That, or awful sex comedy films from 1970s Earth.’

‘Are you guilty of something?’

This was too surreal. It was like talking to her conscience. That was all she needed. A sound-alike Jiminy Cricket.

‘Where am I?’

‘You are a guest of the Divine.’

‘Guest? You mean prisoner?’

‘The Divine Synod would like to know your name.’

Bernice told the voice her name, although she was surprised it didn’t know already. She couldn’t quite get used to speaking to what, to all intents and purposes, sounded exactly like herself.

‘Do you live for tomorrow, Professor Summerfield?’ the Bernice-like voice asked.

‘I’d like to.’

Galhid and Tomast approached the wall slowly. It had acquired a greenish-brown hue due to the rust and the development of a fungus patch that had spread over time. Underneath it was metallic, though and the Knights of the Harvest could hear the deep throbbing of machinery from within. Sir Galhid put a hand out to restrain his squire and took the final few steps to the wall alone. Gently, he placed his gloved hand on the wall. 'It is as she said,' he confirmed. 'It is just a machine.' He started scratching the lichen, fungus and moss from the metal bulkhead, now gesturing for Tomast to help.

Together they cleared an area the size of a man. Then Galhid peered closely at the surface. He removed his gauntlet and let his fingers brush lightly over the wall, feeling for the crack he knew should be there. There it was!

He removed a blade from the sheath at his waist and started scraping at the fissure, enlarging it and clarifying the outline of a door.

Tomast stared at the hatch and his eyes hazed over with the tears of a man who had started to believe.

'How can this be?' he asked. 'How can we have been instructed by the Harvest Queen several lifetimes ago? How can she have been right about this?'

'Because, like the Divine, she had seen the future.' Galhid smiled. 'You see now that this is no fool's errand?'

Tomast nodded. Galhid smiled. Then he bent and took the mechanism from his pack. He placed it on the door and activated the magnetics. It glued itself to the hatch and Galhid applied himself to turning its round handle.

It was an effort at first, but Galhid was a strong man.

'Tell the story again,' said Tomast.

'Ha!' Galhid paused in his efforts. Now that it looms close, eh?' He went back to his attempt to open the door, but as he strained, he told the tale. 'The Queen of the Harvest was a cunning warrior. She fought the Divine and created her Knights to aid in the struggle.'

Gradually, the wheel on the opening device turned more easily. Galhid grunted.

'But she was not cunning enough. Of all the people in Clavista, hers alone was the future the Divine could not discern. But, it captured her. Some say the Queen sacrificed herself.'

Galhid was now turning the handle freely. Then he felt the door give just a fraction.

'We're through,' he said.

'The Divine itself,' whispered Tomast.

The two men stepped through the hatch and closed it behind them.

Bernice was still sitting on the floor. No chair had been offered; no food or water. It was perfectly obvious what sort of society this was. How could she have got it so wrong?

Her disembodied voice had been silent since their last exchange and the glass of the window above her remained smoked. Bernice suspected that the man she had seen briefly upon first waking was still there. Lurking. Listening.

‘Is this designed to break me?’ she asked. ‘I could do with a drink. Maybe a bit to eat? Are there no rules here on how you treat prisoners?’ Her head lolled. She felt half drunk, which was most unfair considering the lack of liquid refreshment on offer. ‘Sorry,’ she mumbled. ‘Guests’.

‘You are an anomaly,’ the voice said.

‘You’re telling me...’

‘What is your function?’

‘I’m fighting against an implacable enemy. I’m looking for weapons. Anything to stop them; we’re trying to hold them back.’

‘Where do you come from?’

‘It’s a long story, but I’m not a local girl.’

‘You are an anomaly.’

‘So you say.’ Bernice sighed. She needed to get out of here and fast. ‘The Divine cannot see your future.’

‘Do you have a crystal ball?’

‘The Divine can see all things. All possibilities. It guides the people of Clavista.’ A pause. ‘But not you.’

Although she felt as though she did not have the strength to lift her head, Benny smiled. ‘Are you trying to say I’m impossible?’

‘You are an anomaly.’

‘Anyway, where’s the fun in knowing the future?’ This time Bernice did manage to raise her head. ‘A few of my friends have some knowledge of the future. It always seems to weigh rather heavily on them.’

She started coughing. Why did she feel so weak? It was beginning to frighten her. She felt like she imagined she’d feel at twice her age.

‘The future is everything,’ the Divine replied. ‘Everything we do is geared to tomorrow. It is our driving force. Our reason for being. Would it not be wonderful if you knew that your future was deeply cared for and about?’

‘Cared for by you? No thanks.’

There was pause. Then it said: ‘You are dying. There is something wrong with your life signs. Your cells are ill-formed.’

‘What?’ Bernice frowned. Was this why she felt so weak? ‘What do you mean: “ill-formed”?’

‘The Synod estimates you will die in one hour, seventeen minutes if

the cellular degradation continues at the same rate.'

'See what I mean about how knowing the future is no fun?'

Then a different voice filled the room.

'Who are you?' It was the male voice.

'Still hiding?' Bernice asked. 'I can understand why. I mean if I actually knew what the voice of God sounded like and I met someone who spoke with the same voice, I'd kind of assume...'

'Are you Divine?' The question was hesitant; verging on the hysteric. 'Well,' Bernice smiled. 'Some would say so...' Her half-laugh turned to another choking fit.

'Would you like some water?'

Bernice snorted. The very idea made her pass her dry tongue across her arid lips. 'Yes.'

The door in the far left hand corner of the cell opened. It made Bernice jump. She'd been alone in the bare room for hours. It had been as if nothing else existed. As if she really had been talking to herself.

The man was tall and skinny, his hair closely-cropped. The white robes he wore were creased and he moved mechanically. He was carrying a simple, plastic canteen, which he offered to Bernice, while he averted his eyes.

Trying not to snatch, Bernice took the canteen and gulped at the water, managing not to spill any down her chin. Tilting her head back, eyes closed, she drained the container and handed it back. 'Thank you,' she said and their eyes met for the first time. He had very pale brown – almost yellow – eyes housed in a surprisingly open face.

'What are you doing, Herald Haine?' asked Bernice's voice from above. 'I am giving you assistance,' said Haine.

'To me, not to that.' Bernice smiled pointing at the ceiling. 'That's not really clarifying things is it?'

'You have given sustenance to the anomaly. You have breached protocol.'

'No!' said Haine. 'No, I am assisting...'

'You have breached protocol,' the voice repeated. 'An Usher has been dispatched.'

'What?' A tinge of outrage entered Haine's voice. 'For me?'

'That is correct.'

Haine looked mystified for a second and then he blurted out: 'Didn't you know I was gong to do this?' Immediately he realised the blasphemy of the question. 'I'm sorry,' he babbled, quickly. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... to...'

Bernice stood up and patted Haine's shoulder. 'Don't worry. We'll sort it all out. Somehow.' She pointed at the door. 'Shall we?' As she took the first step, Bernice almost collapsed, but Haine reached out

and supported her before she could fall.

As he helped her up the steps the door to the main chamber burst open in a shower of sparks. Instinctively, Haine threw his arms up to shield his eyes, dropping Bernice in the process.

When they looked up again, Galhid was framed in the doorway with an acetylene broadsword in his right hand. Tomast stood behind with his back to the room, a pulse rifle pulled tightly into his shoulder.

Galhid moved forward and picked Haine up by his throat, squeezing his neck in one gauntleted hand.

‘Herald,’ he spat.

‘Wait!’ Bernice shouted.

Galhid released his grip on Haine and looked at Bernice in shock. Tomast turned into the room, his mouth agape.

‘Yes,’ she said, struggling to stand. ‘I know. I sound like your god. Pure coincidence.’

Suddenly a shadow fell on her face. Something was blocking the light from the doorway. Tomast realised too late that he was supposed to be covering Galhid’s back and turned.

The bronze figure of an Usher stood there, its arm extended and its palm open displaying the tell-tale iridescent circle. A beam of rainbow light shot from the disk, striking Galhid squarely in the back. His body arched, bathed in a soft glow. As Bernice stared, he simply aged to death before her eyes. All in the space of less than a second.

The Usher turned its attention to the second intruder, but Tomast had already pulled the trigger of his pulse rifle. Bolts of energy hit the Usher in an arc that encompassed the creature’s chest and ended on its extended arm. As soon as the last laser hit the palm, the Usher’s hand exploded, leaving a smoking stump.

The creature shuddered and stumbled forward, the pale blue glow on its smooth glass visage now pulsing with a red tinge. Then it just swayed to the right and ended up leaning against the wall.

Tomast dropped his weapon and rushed to Galhid’s body. Bernice joined him. He stared down at the decrepit figure and shook his head. Then he looked at Bernice and there was a strange mix of hatred and joy in his eyes.

‘What is it?’ Bernice asked. ‘Do you... know me?’

‘Your voice...’

Bernice nodded. ‘I know, it’s the same as this “Divine”.’

Tomast shook his head. ‘No. You don’t understand.’ He started at her. ‘You are why we’re here.’

Haine was examining the Usher. ‘It’s not dead,’ he said.

Bernice tore her gaze from Tomast and looked at the Herald. ‘It’s a robot isn’t it?’ asked Bernice. ‘How can it not be dead if it was never alive?’ She stood up and hobbled to the creature, staring at its smooth,

glassy faceplate. The light that came from within was fading. Something made Bernice feel immensely sorry for the robot. It was totally irrational, but for some reason, she lifted a hand to the robot's face.

'It's not a robot,' Haine replied.

Bernice touched the featureless visor and flashbulbs started going off in her head. The pain was excruciating. She sank to her knees, all the while clutching at the Usher.

'Bernice...' The Usher spoke with the same voice as the Divine: with her voice.

Her head started to clear and she suddenly felt stronger than she had all day. Bernice stood and gazed at the Usher's faceplate. The pale light was contorting. For a moment, Bernice thought it was her reflection she could see, but then she gasped. The light had formed itself into a perfect representation of her face. '...help me.'

'What the bloody hell is going on here?' she demanded. 'What is this place and who are you all? Why is everything to do with me?'

'I am Tomast,' said the squire. He bowed before continuing. 'You are the Queen of the Harvest.'

'She is the Divine!' countered Haine.

'I am Professor Bernice Summerfield, and you lot are mental!'

'Listen...' croaked the Usher. It slid down the wall and ended up sitting on the floor like a discarded ragdoll.

'The Divine took your soul,' Tomast said.

'Heresy!' Haine spluttered.

'Shut. Up!' Bernice said. 'I'll decide what's heresy round here, seeing as I'm God.'

'You were captured by the Divine,' Tomast continued. 'They took your soul; your essence, your voice, your... everything and assimilated it into itself. It thought that if it became you the Knights of the Harvest would give up.'

'You're a knight?'

'A squire.' Tomast smiled. 'But we didn't give up. We kept to your doctrine, preparing for this day. The day you foretold.'

'Listen, I know a thing or two about time travel,' Benny said. 'Are you saying I will do this?'

'No...' The Usher whispered. 'There was a schism. You... we... were split. But I was aware of what was happening to you in the future. I could see what had to happen. I knew I had to set up the Knights of the Harvest.' The Usher lifted its head towards Tomast. 'I knew who I had to send.'

'But that was centuries ago,' Tomast said. 'I thought I was chosen because Galhid was...' He looked down at his fallen mentor.

'So what happens now?' asked Bernice. 'I can't get out of here. I

haven't got the time ring.'

'It was entrusted to the Knights,' the Usher said.

Tomast's eyes grew round in realisation. 'The relic!' he bent down and quickly extracted a metallic box from Galhid's pack. 'Here,' he said and offered it to Bernice.

She took the box and opened it. Within was the time ring.

'Before you were captured, you gave the relic to the Knight Commander for safe keeping. You decreed that it should be kept safe until this day.'

'How clever of me.' Bernice smiled and then looked at the Usher. 'But what is the Divine?'

'I think it's a sort of space-time blister,' the Usher explained. 'It is the protective covering for some form of temporal wound. That's my best theory. I also think that Braxiatel sent you here.'

'What? Really?' Bernice squatted beside the Usher. 'Why?'

'You won't like it.'

'When do I ever like the stuff Irving Braxiatel does these days?'

'The Divine couldn't tell what I was going to do. It could see the future of every citizen of Clavista but not mine. I think the schism had given me some form of protection, as if I had acquired temporal shielding.'

'Temporal shielding,' Bernice whispered.

Suddenly, Tomast spoke: 'I have rescued the Queen of the Harvest and now I must destroy the Divine.'

'Destroy...' Haine was a man whose world had started to crumble around him. Bernice sympathised.

'Before you do that, Tomast, promise me something,' said Bernice. 'You must also look after Haine – and all the Heralds and other people working here. Understand? I don't want a war of recrimination? You lot have got to get along. OK?'

'I understand,' said Tomast.

'I will continue to be your Herald,' agreed Haine.

'Good.' Bernice turned about the room. 'So... destroy the Divine.'

'It's me...' the Usher said quietly. Everyone looked at it. 'I channel the Divine power. If you throw me into the sphere, it'll cause feedback, overload the system. If I'm right – and I've had a few centuries to think about this the Divine will explode, causing a wound in the time vortex.'

'It's a double paradox,' Bernice said. 'But we can't kill... you. Me. It's just... wrong.'

'I am not you. This is merely an echo. The consciousness of your split self was consumed by the Divine all those years ago. It was your presence here that caused its re-awakening. I have a robotic body, but I am animated by the Divine power. My mind is a facsimile of yours.'

The Usher bowed its head. 'And my light is fading. You must do it while the power still flows through me.'

Haine stepped forward. 'I will do it.'

'And I.' Tomast took his place at Haine's shoulder.

Bernice couldn't watch. It was too much. She felt sick. She just wanted to go home. She turned from her two would-be disciples and operated the time ring.

Not noticing her disappearance, the Squire and the Herald dragged the Usher outside onto the walkway. With a final glance at the beautiful orb before them, the two men cast the bronze figure over the handrail and watched as it spiralled down into the iridescent light, its body shining a glorious gold as it fell.

The Propaganda War

John Dorney

A fizz of static ripped across the screen. A spiral of colour twisted, rolled and coalesced, eventually forming itself into the image of a man. He was around forty, unshaven and bedraggled, his clothes torn and stained. He stared into the camera and spoke.

‘This is Eric Pallant, Channel Eight News. You may know that a week ago I was captured while reporting on the raid on Proxima Minor. Since then I have remained in captivity. I have been treated well, I have been fed. And now I bring you a message. I bring you a message from the Deindum –’

‘Pause.’

The image froze. Braxiatel stared at the monitor for a few moments, cradling his fingers. Then he turned to the aide behind him. ‘When did this come in, Cordel?’

‘Thirty minutes ago.’

‘I presume it wasn’t just sent to us?’

‘It’s already on most of the major networks.’

Braxiatel sighed. ‘Of course it is. Very well. Play.’

The recording broke into life again. ‘Your continued resistance is untenable. The Deindum are all-powerful and you cannot stop them. Further attempts to defy them will merely result in loss of life. Immediate surrender is the only option –’

‘Stop.’ Pallant’s face was once again arrested mid-sentence.

‘There’s another five minutes yet, sir.’ Cordel gestured at the screen.

‘I suspect I’ve got the gist.’ Braxiatel cradled his chin in his hands for a few moments. ‘Thirty minutes ago, you say.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, at least we have time to alleviate the panic.’ Braxiatel rose to his feet and headed for the door. ‘Call a press conference. We need to deal with this right away.’

‘Really?’

Braxiatel stopped. ‘You don’t think so?’

‘Well, with respect, sir...’ the aide shuffled uncomfortably, ‘It is just one man.’

‘One man? Just one man?’ He laughed bitterly. ‘One man is all it takes, Cordel!’

‘All what takes?’

Braxiatel turned. ‘All it takes to become a symbol. Come on.’ He marched out of the room. ‘Call the conference.’

Pallant's face stared bleakly and unmovingly from the monitor.

'Following the release of the footage, a statement was made by Irving Braxiatel, senior member of the coalition...'

'The seizure of a hostage and the subsequent parading of that hostage on our mediascreens and communication networks galaxy-wide is an atrocity that demonstrates precisely the heinous depths to which the Deindum are prepared to sink. Anyone who doubted the necessity for conflict should watch this recording and consider their position carefully. What if it were your friend? A member of your family, your partner?

'We will not let the Deindum continue to use and abuse one of our own for their selfish ends. We wish to assure all those supporting us that we will not abandon you. Whether you be many, or whether you be one. To that end, I hereby announce that I, personally, will lead the mission to ensure the release of Mister Pallant and his safe return to us. Any questions?'

'As usual, no members of the Deindum could be reached for comment...'

The cell was pretty much what you'd expect from a cell, Pallant felt. Dank. Grey. Small. Every cliché combined. If his captors had planned on designing a room that said 'alien prison' instantly the second you looked at it, then they'd succeeded. Funny, he thought. He'd always assumed that the real thing wouldn't look like the vids. Still. You live and learn.

He couldn't remember much about his capture. It was all a bit blurred and unfocused. He'd been aboard the unfortunately-named spaceship Imperius when they'd been attacked in a Deindum raid. He'd seen whole sections of the ship blown away into the void. He supposed he was lucky to be alive. Knocked out as the ship rocked with one particularly nasty explosion, stretching for the hand of another man in the next room trying to pull him into safety, he'd assumed the slow encroach of blackness was death itself. He'd not been afraid. It felt like release. It had almost been a disappointment to end up alive here instead. He rested his head against the cold, hard wall as the key turned in the lock.

A masked guard entered the room, tray in hand. 'Here's your food. Don't eat it all at once...'

'You know what I don't get?'

The guard stopped. Pallant rose to his feet and walked up to him.

'You're not one of them,' said Pallant. He looked the guard up and down. 'You're human. Or at least humanoid.'

'Observant, aren't you? I suppose you are a journalist.'

'Yeah, I trained.' The reporter allowed himself the briefest flicker of a smile before his voice turned grim. 'Why are you doing this? Why are you working for them?'

'I'm not here to answer questions. I'm here to serve food. If you'll excuse me.' The guard headed for the door.

'No, no, wait, I've not finished...'

'I have.' The door slammed shut. The keys turned once more.

Pallant let out a sigh. 'Damn.' Another traitor working with the Deindum, refusing to talk, refusing to connect.

He sat down to examine the tray. Plastic knife and fork, nothing he could use to attack anyone. Dry potatoes. Bread. Some vegetables. An apple. Not much. But better than nothing. He tore a chunk off the bread and started to eat.

Dimly, an idea began to brew.

The room was a maelstrom of activity. Technicians ran from computer to computer, inputting data. Men in uniform marched in and out with dispatches as guards and soldiers stared dispassionately from the sidelines. Huge screens displayed Pallant's frozen image, maps of his last known whereabouts, as well as the usual maps of the war zones and streams of information. Braxiatel watched it all from his seat, fingers steepled in front of him. The command centre wasn't quite his style – he preferred more relaxed surroundings – but, having put humility aside and agreed that few people were better placed to take this kind of active strategy role, he was getting used to it. And there was so much to be done, all the time.

'First we must find out where the video came from,' he said. 'Who supplied it to the networks.'

'On it,' one technician called out.

'Even it was done anonymously, there will be a trace.' A barely detectable chuckle. 'Not necessarily one that just anyone could find, of course. But there will be a trace.'

Cordel watched his superior with a confused expression. 'I still don't get it, sir.'

'Get what, Cordel?'

'We're in the middle of a war. This is using up an awful lot of resources. I mean, it's taking up all of one of the big boards.' Cordel gestured at the three large wall-mounted liquid display monitors.

'You think it pointless?' This was a genuine question. Braxiatel was sufficiently confident in his judgement and authority that he was happy to let his staff voice such opinions.

'Perhaps.' Cordel shrugged. 'It's not like anyone's going to listen to what the Deindum are making him say.'

'I told you.' Braxiatel got to his feet. 'He's a symbol. That's why they're doing this. It's not the message, not literally. They know we'll never agree. It's a different sort of message. A different sort of point.'

'Which is?'

Braxiatel pointed up to the image on the screen, the rough-edged, tired-eyed man staring down at them. 'He's a face. An actual specific person. Look at him.'

Cordel looked up as Braxiatel waved his hand towards the picture. 'That's someone with a mother. A family. Friends. Some of them you might have met, some of them you might even know.'

Cordel nodded. He was beginning to see the point now. 'An individual.'

'Precisely.' Braxiatel smiled at him. 'In a war, people die en masse, so it's hard to view them as individuals. Whereas now, one man represents them all. His pain represents all their pain. His continued welfare their health and happiness.'

'And if he dies?'

'Oh, he will die.' Braxiatel replied matter-of-factly. 'They'll have to kill him, that's the entire point. His death represents their own potentially disastrous fate. Tangle with the Deindum and this is what happens. Why not surrender now?'

'They're using him.'

'Exactly.' Braxiatel returned his gaze to the screen. 'Mr Pallant is but a pawn. He isn't intended to make us surrender. He's intended to win the battle for hearts and minds. The propaganda war.'

'I see.'

Braxiatel rested his hand lightly on Cordel's shoulder. 'Lose that and you lose everything. A demotivated army is no army at all. You understand?' Cordel nodded. 'I do.'

'Good.' Braxiatel returned to his seat. 'So we trace him.'

The young man sat shaking in the room, stripped to a vest and pants as white as the walls, weeping, clearly distressed. Cordel watched through the window as Braxiatel spoke quietly and gently to the small figure before him, seemingly offering concessions and possibilities. The youth's expression gradually changed, the tears drying and the possibility of a smile beginning to cross his face.

Braxiatel closed the door on the interrogation chamber and strode off down the corridor.

'So that was the courier?' Cordel said, running to keep up. 'Did he say anything?'

'Not much. Yes, he delivered the footage to the news stations. He'd received it as an information stream delivered electronically from an anonymous source via a satellite. He trusted this source and he didn't actually view it in advance. He had no idea what he was actually delivering.' Braxiatel paused briefly as they turned a corner. 'But he's getting thrown to the lions of the press pit anyway.'

Cordel frowned. 'But if he didn't do anything deliberately...'

‘If the Deindum can use one of ours as a symbol, then we could do with a symbol of our own. Fight fire with fire, you know the sort of thing.’

‘A symbol of what?’

‘Don’t betray your own.’ Braxiatel re-entered the main operations room.

‘Isn’t that a bit... manipulative?’

Braxiatel stopped in his tracks and walked back to his aide. His expression changed entirely, breaking into a benign smile. ‘Sorry, sorry, in all the rush I completely forgot, how terribly rude.’

‘Erm...’

He extended a bony arm and grasped Cordel’s hand. ‘My name’s Irving Braxiatel, we’ve clearly not met.’

Cordel winced.

‘Of course it’s manipulative.’ Braxiatel spat, flinging his hand back down and scowling. ‘Everything’s manipulative. The universe is a place of disorder and disarray. Chaos is but an inch away at all times. If someone didn’t manipulate it, who knows what sort of mess it could get into?’

‘You really believe that?’

‘Of course I do...’ Braxiatel stopped, almost interrupting himself. He appeared to consider the question for a second. Then he snapped out of it. ‘You’ll see, when we’ve won. You’ll see I was right, you’ll see how things work. How they’ve always worked. But right now, we’re wasting time. The courier gives us a starting point. We know where he got the footage from. We have a lead.’

‘And we trace it?’

‘We trace it.’

The guard stepped back into the cell and looked down at the huddled form in front of him.

‘Finished?’

‘In every sense.’ Pallant shoved the tray at the guard’s feet. ‘When are you just going to kill me?’

‘We hope that will not be necessary.’ The guard stooped to pick the tray up.

‘I can’t keep going like this.’ Pallant leapt up towards him. ‘The endless wait. The uncertainty.’

The guard’s mask looked back at him, obviously unreadable. ‘It won’t be long,’ he said, before turning on his heels, striding out of the door and locking it behind.

‘Well, that was easy.’ Pallant smiled to himself as he looked at the stolen plastic knife from the tray twisting in his hand. ‘The simplest distraction is the most effective, it seems.’

Braxiatel spread the sheets out on a large table in front of him and Cordel. An enormous web of lines tangled, mingled and wound around themselves and across what appeared to be an astral map. Cordel struggled to make sense of any of it.

‘They’re good, I’ll give them that,’ Braxiatel said, nodding. ‘These lines represent the signal trace that delivered the footage to the courier.’

Cordel frowned. ‘How many are there?’

‘Thirty. They bounced it off thirty different satellites, scrambling every time. It was an utter nightmare to decode.’

‘So how did you do it?’

Braxiatel smiled confidentially. ‘My people have certain high-level technologies. This sort of thing is in the nursery to us. I merely took advantage and borrowed some relevant equipment.’

‘And you found where the signal came from?’

‘This planetoid here.’ Braxiatel stabbed his finger down onto the map. ‘Baratain Gamma in the Coster system.’

‘So what are we waiting for? Let’s go.’

Braxiatel shook his head. ‘It’s too obvious, I’m afraid.’

‘Obvious?’ Cordel couldn’t believe it. ‘After being bounced off thirty satellites?’

‘And encrypted.’

‘Well, yes, that too, but... obvious?’

Braxiatel smiled at him, wryly. ‘They know who they’re dealing with, remember. They know I can trace this.’ He stared down at the maps. ‘According to the records, Baratain Gamma is a frontier world. Lacking in any real technology or interest. Certainly it’s not somewhere the Deindum have shown any inclination in involving before.’

‘It is rather out of their way.’

‘And well within ours, precisely. Why hide Mister Pallant there? Look closer.’ With a triumphant flourish, Braxiatel pulled from his pocket a piece of his paper covered in data. ‘The records about Baratain have been faked. Not easy for the trained eye to notice, let alone the untrained, but it was. It’s not a barren frontier world at all. It was in fact, until recently, an armed staging post. Heavily armed. Most of the weaponry is still active and some of it is surprisingly sophisticated. That, my dear Cordel, is a trap. There’s liable to be some hidden Deindum shock troops ferreted away there somehow. We trace the signal, chase it down, get wiped out. A trap.’ Braxiatel brushed the map aside. ‘No, the footage was probably delivered there by hand from the real prison. Presumably at the same time they sent in their advance guard.’

He moved over to a technician. 'We need to check the cargo lanes. See if any ships at all visited Baratain Gamma in the last week. The one we're looking for was probably heavily shielded. And when we do find one, we want to know where it came from, all right?'

The technician nodded and started to type into his computer.

Braxiatel smiled. 'Nearly there, I think. Nearly there.'

The guard looked down at Pallant as he sat, cross-legged on the floor, hands rammed down deep into what remained of his pockets.

'You feeling better today?'

'Better?' Pallant looked up at him. 'You actually care?'

'You're more use to us if you're fit and healthy.'

'Great.' Pallant tried to read any expression at all from the blank visor, but couldn't. Eventually he gave up. 'I'm fine.' He stared back down at the floor. 'Why don't you just go?'

'All right.' Quietly and efficiently, the guard picked up the day's dinner tray, slipped from the cell and turned the key in the lock.

Pallant let his rest on the door for a few seconds, before withdrawing from his pocket the apple he'd taken from the tray and smiling. He pulled the plastic knife from the other pocket and began to whittle.

'The planet Rocroker.' Braxiatel read the report he'd just been handed and gestured to the star map. 'That's where the footage originated. One ship landed there shortly after the attack during which Mister Pallant got himself captured... and then another one left for Baratain Gamma shortly before the signal started to be transmitted. That's where he is.'

Cordel nodded. 'So now we fire up the fleet.'

'I have a better idea. We don't.'

'We don't?'

Braxiatel smiled, mischievously. 'I get him. Alone.'

Cordel blinked. 'You?'

'Don't you see? They're expecting us to head for Baratain, yes?'

'Yes, but I don't see that...'

'Then they're going to have concentrated the bulk of their forces there. We send the fleet as a diversion, whilst I slip in unnoticed to the real location and bring him out.'

Cordel shook his head. 'But that's suicide! They'll still have people there. There'll still be troops.'

'Like I said, Mister Cordel, I have access to certain higher technologies. If anyone can do it, it's me.'

'But... but why?' Cordel didn't understand.

'A publicity coup of our own. Not only will we not let you rot in prison, not only will we not let the enemy execute you in public, but

we will treat your rescue with the highest priority. One of our most senior figures will rescue you personally.'

'You're mad.'

'Am I?' Brax's eyes twinkled. 'But it is a piece of propaganda to fire the bellies, now isn't it?' He walked over to an aide. 'My private shuttle is in the dock. Get it started.'

When he heard the key turn in the lock, Pallant braced himself. He needed to time this right.

The guard entered with the tray and placed it on the floor. 'Here you go.' He brought himself to his full height and stared at the journalist. 'Nothing to say this time? No complaints, no bitterness?'

Pallant just stared at the wall opposite, silent and unresponsive.

'Very well then. Until tomorrow.' The guard turned. And within seconds Pallant was on him.

'Don't move.' Pallant had his arm around his throat, and was pressing something hard into the base of the guard's back. 'Do you know what this is?'

'What the...'

'A blaster.' He smiled. 'I've had it concealed since you brought me here...'

'A...?' The guard seemed confused and started to look round. 'Then why haven't you used it before now?'

Pallant brought his hand up sharply under the guard's chin as he turned. The masked man's head jerked back and he fell back onto the cell wall before dropping to the floor, unconscious.

'Cos it's made out of apple, you idiot.' Pallant tossed the whittled piece of fruit aside onto the cell floor. 'Just needed to distract you for a moment.' He knelt beside the unconscious form and rifled the pockets, soon finding the keys and the guard's own gun. 'Just in case.' He checked the battery pack on the short, stubby firearm. Full. Good. No obvious earpiece or communication device to warn of the escape. Maybe in the helmet? Pallant tried to find a catch or button or some other means of release. Nothing that he could see. The guard groaned woozily, and Pallant reluctantly abandoned the search. He was wasting time.

He stepped out of the cell into the similarly dank stone corridor he'd occasionally glimpsed as his captors had left. Reaching the gun, he glanced sharply left and right, checking for further guards, but the passageway was empty. 'So far, so good.' He turned back to the door and locked it, hearing the familiar jangle once more but this time from the position of power. He couldn't have the guard alerting anyone before he was ready. As quietly as possible, mentally thanking the Deindum for removing his shoes upon capture and making his stealthy

progress easier, Pallant crept towards the furthest end of the corridor from which a dim light could be seen. The faint humming and clicking of machinery grew steadily louder the closer he got.

At the end of the corridor was a door, ajar. With the end of the gun, Pallant nudged it open and peeked his head round the edge.

Some steps led down to a lower level. Again, no further people were visible, human or otherwise. Pallant frowned, puzzled, but continued down the steps tentatively.

He appeared to be in a large room, almost like a cargo bay or a warehouse. The unit he'd left floated in the middle of the room, suspended in a kind of force bubble. From the outside it appeared to be a large windowless wooden box – modern and clean, very different from the ruined stone walls of the home he been used to the previous week.

He walked back up the steps and ran his hand over the walls. Then he opened the door and did the same to the surface he'd previously thought of as stone inside. Immediately he could tell that it was fake.

Returning to the ground, he could just feel a faint vibration beneath his feet. And there, in the distance... 'Is that... an engine?'

He jumped up and down experimentally to test the gravity. 'I'm on a spaceship.' He nodded to himself as the picture came together in his head.

'A spaceship in flight.' He looked back at the force bubble. 'They fake the cell and suspend it so I can't tell I'm on a moving vehicle. So I won't be able to tell anyone precisely where I was. Ingenious.'

He glanced around the room, searching for an exit. Eventually he saw a door in the far wall.

'Well, let's see where the Deindum have put me...' He marched across, pushed it open, and stepped out.

In the cell, the guard shook his head blearily and pushed himself up on his elbows. He turned his head slowly to take in the room. Then suddenly his movements became sharp as he realised his prisoner's absence. 'Oh no.' He rose to his feet. 'Why couldn't he wait!' His grabbed at the door. It didn't budge. 'Oh, of course...'

Pallant stared at the flight deck, confused. Glistening. White. Little lights blinking and flashing everywhere as the ship flew through space on autopilot.

He moved across the empty room towards one of the computer desks. Familiar-looking technology everywhere. Earth technology. 'What the...?'

He pressed a button randomly. A computer screen blared into life. File after file appeared on the screen. He noticed one folder in particular. A folder with his name on it.

He opened it and started to leaf through the documents. The images seemed to represent an elaborate collection of forged data. Pallant found himself getting more and more confused the further he progressed. Cargo manifests changed. Transport ships invented. A number of men bribed. Faked transmission signals. What the hell?

He checked the ship database. According to its records he was on a private shuttle registered to...

Someone cleared their throat behind him. Pallant spun round.

The guard stood on the other side of the room. 'Fortunately there was a second exit concealed in the cell. In case of emergencies, you know.' He pressed a concealed stud on the side of his helmet and pulled it away to reveal a familiar face.

'But...' Pallant winced. 'You were on the ship. When I was knocked out... You were reaching for me.' He paused. 'Aren't you -?'

'Yes,' said Brax. 'Yes, I am. This probably doesn't look very good, does it?'

A short while later Braxiatel sat in his chair in the control room. The excited hubbub had died down now and everyone was back to their usual duties, working quietly and efficiently.

Cordel walked up and handed him a sheet of data. Before he could leave, Braxiatel raised his hand. 'One second, Cordel.'

'Sir?'

'What I said before.' Braxiatel tilted his head and looked up at him. 'About manipulation.'

'Yes, sir?'

'Am I wrong? Does everything need to be manipulated?'

Cordel shrugged. 'It's hard to say. You've probably got a better idea of that than me.'

'Probably.' Braxiatel sighed. 'Possibly. Or maybe I've just thought it was true for such a long time I can't see there's any other way. Maybe once you start you can't stop.'

'I don't know what you want me to say, sir.'

Braxiatel frowned for a few moments. Then he shuffled in his seat and began to study the data. 'All right, Mister Cordel, you can go.' He brushed him away with a lazy gesture. Cordel nodded and walked out of the door.

Across the other side of the room, a monitor blared out a news report.

'And today, there's been a major success for the Coalition. In a stunning publicity coup, Irving Braxiatel was able to personally track down and rescue the kidnapped journalist Eric Pallant, sources hailing him as a hero. Sadly, Pallant himself was badly injured by Deindum counter-fire during the rescue, and is currently lying in a coma in hospital with no immediate

hope of recovery...'

'Off' Braxiatel barked. And the screen went blank.

In The Ledgers Of Madness

Mark Clapham

It was colloquially known as the Hollow, although that wasn't its official name. It lay beneath the cold ground of a desolate moon, the outline of the sub-surface structure marked by a perimeter fence cutting through the moon dust with lasers, microslicers, and types of security beam so secret that they didn't even have a scientific term.

The dead ground within the fence curved gently to a central hump, indicating the dome buried beneath. Four towers, one at each corner of the fence, acted as both entrances to the underground complex and sentry points for the universe's most bored security personnel.

No-one ever tried to breach the fence, or access the elevators without permission. No-one got that far, the orbital weapons array made sure of that. There was little to do all day except polish sniper rifles and oil ground-to-air rocket launchers that would sadly never be used. In the last few hours of a shift lethargy tended to set in, and the passing minutes would crawl by watching the official traffic to and from the Hollow.

It was dull stuff. A steady stream of shuttles to and from the spaceports slightly outside the fence, and the distant specs of lifeforms crossing the vac-sealed access corridors between the spaceport and the four towers.

Commuters, nothing but commuters, going to work in the Hollow below. Having passed security checks, the variety of beings who visited the Hollow would take a short elevator ride to sub-level-one. From there you could see the exact nature of the heavily protected complex, so carefully buried.

Underneath a dull grey dome rigged with lights that were supposed to simulate a pleasant sunlight, but instead produced a watery, depressing aura equivalent to a wet Thursday afternoon, the Hollow was an inverted ziggurat, with levels cut into the stone of the moon stepping down and down, getting tighter and tighter until, presumably, there was some kind of platform at the very bottom.

Presumably. There were rumours, but no-one who worked there really wanted to ask, or admit they didn't know.

Into the rock walls of each level were carved chambers of varying sizes, from wide, open-planned spaces to narrow, single-occupancy cubicles. Between the various chambers, never-ending step-on, step-off escalators ran up and down the entirety of the Hollow, allowing rapid access for employees. Paperwork moved faster, pneumatic tubes

bending up and across each level, tubes of documentation whipping through them at dizzying speeds, dropping into safety baskets in, hopefully, the correct office.

Paperwork was the lifeblood of this place, the very stuff of life for the Hollow. It was to protect the information held, and the workers who interpreted it, that the extraordinary security measures on the surface and above the moon's atmosphere were in place. Many powerful beings would have loved to bring the work there to a halt with a well-lopped micro-nuke or gene-targeted nano-plague.

They called it the Hollow, but its official title was this: Outland Revenue Central Administration. ORCA.

The taxation centre of the galaxy.

Felterby entered his small office on vertical 97 of sub-step 13 backwards, stiffening his back to push the door open. His arms were fully laden, with a thick stack of manila files and a hot, caffeinated beverage balanced on top. His left, thinly webbed hand held the bottom of the stack, while his right gripped the drink on top. The stack was so high he couldn't see over the top.

With the door braced open, Felterby began to angle himself around towards the desk, trying not to drop either his work or his drink.

He was a short, thin creature, descended from amphibians but entirely land-bound, the main evidence of his ancestry being his thick grey skin and the whiskery top lip that drooped from each side of his mouth, the ends trailing below his chin. That silvery-grey skin was neatly off-set by his charcoal suit, and his small black eyes were framed by thick-rimmed spectacles.

Even by the standards of the bureaucrats of the Outland Revenue, who toiled in the darkened chambers and meeting rooms of ORCA's sub-strata, Felterby was considered a cliché amongst bureaucrats, a little grey man in a little grey suit.

Bending his knees, he managed to manoeuvre his pile of files on to the corner of his desk, nudging them across until they were firmly in place. He carefully lifted his caffeine off the top of a pile, and stood up straight.

What he saw over the top of the files made him nearly drop his caffeine. Instead his hand jerked involuntarily, sloshing a little over the edge of the disposable cup. The hot liquid scalded the back of his hand, but Felterby hardly noticed.

Professor Bernice Summerfield was sitting behind his desk, feet up on the scratched plastiboard surface, and a file open across her knees.

Summerfield was a terran female, an apeform of some kind with pinkish skin and a dark mop of hair. Felterby had met her a year before on one of the moons of Venus.

Well, strictly speaking he hadn't met Summerfield so much as followed her as part of an ongoing investigation. That matter had concluded to Felterby and the Outland Revenue's satisfaction, if not Summerfield's, and he hadn't seen her since.

Now she was sat behind his desk, and he couldn't help but notice she wasn't wearing the official lanyard that would indicate a formal visitor's pass.

'Mr Felterby,' said Summerfield, looking up from the file. 'I was looking for you.'

'Well, this is my office,' he replied lamely. 'How did you get in here? Security would never have let you in without checking with me.' Summerfield looked slightly evasive, her thumb pushing a ring she was wearing around the finger, a little gap of air between metal and skin. 'I didn't actually come through security,' she admitted.

'You broke in?' said Felterby, astonished, impressed and confused.

'I wouldn't say "broke". I sort of slipped in sideways, taking a shortcut through next Tuesday.'

'That was structured like an explanation, but it wasn't one, was it?' Felterby said levelly, straightening his spine and feeling himself regaining some ground.

'No, no it wasn't,' said Summerfield, still fiddling with her ring finger. She waved her free hand in a dismissive gesture. 'That's not what's important here. This is.' She brought her forefinger down into the centre of the open file. 'A matter of intense mutual interest to your employers and myself.'

Felterby leaned forward, cricking his neck to read the file. 'The Red Monks?' He uncricked his neck and looked Summerfield straight in the eye. 'We've been after them for centuries, the deductions they've been claiming are an absolute joke, but we can never pin anything on them because the audit is impossible.'

'Impossible?' Summerfield said.

Felterby decided to play along, and match the human in terms of insouciance. He sat back in the crappy guest chair and cracked the lid of his coffee cup where it overhung the rim, bending it up in little strips. Each split in the plastic made a squeak, which he hoped Summerfield found suitably irritating.

'It's a question of language,' he said. Squeak. 'All citizens are allowed to write their accounts in their own language, and it is the Outland Revenue's responsibility to cater for these cultural differences by covering translation costs.' Squeak. 'Which is fine, in and of itself – we're a big organisation, we can afford to cover every extant language, except the Red Monks don't use an extant language.' Squeak. 'Their ledgers are compiled in the dark tongue, the language of the ancients, the lingua diabolic that drives mortals insane with a

single syllable.'

'Unless,' said Summerfield smugly, 'you had access to the Codex Infernal, carved on an asylum wall by the great necromancer Bai Lonn Quill, the sum of an extended lifetime spent conferring with dead gods and all that.'

Felterby twisted up another strip of cup lid with a particularly violent squeak. Summerfield frowned.

'If such a thing existed, Professor Summerfield, and wasn't just the fevered imaginings of a bored adolescent, then it was lost long, long ago,' said Felterby, leaning forward and putting his coffee cup down as forcibly as he could without spilling the contents. 'I believe this is the point where you tell me that the codex does exist, that you've found it, and we get to the point before I schedule you for repeat audits every year for the next three decades.'

Summerfield sniffed. 'Spoilsport. Very well, I've got the codex. Turns out it wasn't lost in the mists of the past, but the mists of the future.' She shrugged. 'Who knew? Anyway, I have it, transferred to convenient portable format, and I'm willing to use my unique access to this very unique facility to help you bust these monks.'

'Really,' said Felterby. 'How very kind. I'm guessing this kind gesture doesn't come without a price? Have a few undeclared expenses you'd like to be forgotten about, do we?'

'Not at all,' said Summerfield. 'My husband may have cooked his books, but my accounts are as clean as a very clean whistle. And even if they weren't, I've more important things to find. No doubt the amount of backtax we'll be able to pin on this cult will need to be reimbursed from assets. There will be a great many historic artefacts that, should they be repossessed, could usefully be passed into my care for the correct preservation and conservation. For posterity's sake.'

'Posterity,' repeated Felterby. 'Of course. And which particular trinkets interest you?'

Summerfield picked up Felterby's cup, and took a large swig of coffee. She winced at the taste, but the caffeine boost seemed to give her the nerve for the request she was about to make. She gave Felterby a very, very serious look.

'The Cleaver of Worlds,' she said.

Felterby held her gaze. He didn't know whether Summerfield was deluded, outright insane, or looking for some other compensation when this mythical whatever failed to turn up. But she seemed entirely serious.

'OK,' he replied. 'I have the authority to offer compensation to third parties who assist in an operation of this nature. If this works, and we find this cleaver, then it's yours.'

Summerfield nodded. ‘Great.’ Her tone of voice had sunk, as if getting what she’d asked for was the last thing she actually wanted.

‘It will take some time to arrange, of course,’ Felterby said. He wanted to get his drink back but Summerfield was now nursing the cup close to her chest. ‘We could get a team together, maybe in six weeks...’

‘No,’ Summerfield said firmly. Not weeks, days. It’s a three-day flight. I’ve taken the liberty of talking to your procurements department while I was out. You fly out first thing tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow?’ Felterby said. ‘But I can’t possibly...’

Summerfield shrugged as she stood up. ‘You can, and you will.’ She walked over to the door. ‘You said yourself, the revenue have been after this lot for centuries. Don’t want to miss the chance now you’ve got it.’ She opened the door to the corridor. ‘I’ll meet you at the arrivals gate, B’el’vaal spaceport. Four days’ time.’ The door swung shut behind her.

Felterby was lost for words, trying to put all his objections in order. It only took him a second, then he was on his feet, rushing out of the door with a protest on his lips.

‘But as we’ve waiting for centuries what’s the –’

The corridor was silent in both directions.

‘– rush,’ Felterby said, to thin air. Defeated, he wandered back to his desk to rearrange his appointments for the week.

Four days later, Felterby was on a tourist flight landing at B’el’vaal spaceport on Krepsyc. Most of the travellers on his flight were heading not to the Temple of the Frozen Soul, but the tourist resort of Fiesta! ville (the mid-word exclamation mark was apparently a trademark, and it hurt Felterby’s soul every time he saw it). Felterby was the only person on the flight wearing a suit, a detail which made him feel far more alone than the fact that they were mammals.

As promised, Summerfield was waiting for him at the arrivals gate, looking exactly as she had at the Hollow. He was only carrying an overnight bag, and Summerfield pressed a cup of caffeine into his free hand before he could even speak.

‘A peace offering,’ she said. ‘Sorry, I must have taken yours when I left the other day, the least I could do was buy a replacement.’

‘Eh, thanks,’ he said, frowning at the turned up corners of the cup lid. He took a sip – it was hot, and with exactly the right number of sugars.

‘So how do we get to this...?’ Felterby consulted his notes. “‘Temple of the Frozen Soul, that sits atop the peak of Mount Cataclysm ‘neath which the eldest of Gods has slept his ancient slumber since the universe was young.’ How do we get there?’

‘Oh,’ said Summerfield. ‘We take the bus.’

Felterby soon had time to reflect that a stomach full of hot, sugary caffeine wasn’t the best choice when about to take an uphill journey in a juddering, packed bus full of tourists.

The ‘bus’ was a converted military transport with giant, toothed wheels for negotiating the rough terrain of the mountain roads, with the top half stripped away and replaced with a shatterproof glass roof to allow the passengers to take in the views as the bus rolled round the mountain road that wound its way up to the peak of Mount Cataclysm.

It was barely noon and the sun was beating down without the thinnest wisp of cloud to obscure it, and the bus was full of family groups and elderly people of miscellaneous species.

Part of Felterby’s brain wished that the whole sweaty glass box would just fall off the mountain and be done with it. He looked out of the window – it was a long way down, and even the welcoming, perfect blue sea that spread out towards an immaculate horizon from which twin-suns shone would prove fatal from this height.

Felterby had a one-word question for Summerfield, and as they sat, pushed uncomfortably together, a toddler kicking the back of their seats, he asked it:

‘Frozen?’

‘Ah yes,’ replied Summerfield. ‘I see what you mean. Chalk that one up to having a life-span longer than most continents. When the Devourer of Innocents first fell from the void without and began his eternal slumber beneath this now-picturesque spot the climate would have been very different, and the Temple of the Frozen Soul well-named when the Devourer’s followers set up shop. Several thousand years later a legacy of some earlier industrial activity has rather done for that. Slushie?’

Felterby raised a hand in protest as Summerfield offered him the syrupy crushed ice, probably a more rude refusal than was warranted, but his bags were piled up on his knees and digging into his stomach, and the lightweight grey suit he was wearing seemed horribly heavy now.

He wondered where he should direct the flow if he was going to be sick.

Thankfully, at that moment the bus rounded the corner and the view took his mind off his nausea. The Temple of the Frozen Soul, no longer so frozen, was still a spectacle, a warren of ancient stone clinging to the side of the mountain, peppered with a thousand tiny windows from which the Red Monks of the Screaming Doom would shout their blasphemous prayers at an uncaring universe, six times a

day.

Three of those times, they could top up their tans while they did it, but the effort was still there.

The bus continued to the end of the mountain road, turning through an arch carved into the shape of a tormented mouth screaming in infinite agony, and parking up in an open courtyard decorated with onyx walls depicting a million scenes of unthinkable depravity.

‘Cool!’ shouted a little girl, bashing Felterby in the back of the knee as she ran to get off the bus. She was less than half a metre tall and looked like a guinea pig, albeit a guinea pig with a pink bow on its head.

‘Megali, you come back right –’ bellowed the mother, trying to keep her other seventeen children in check to no avail. She twitched her nose apologetically in Felterby’s direction and he smiled wanly.

‘Stop smiling wanly and find your paperwork,’ said Summerfield, suddenly all business. ‘We have serious work to do, and not much time to do it.’

Rifling through his briefcase, Felterby followed her off the bus.

Long, long ago a civilisation had lived beneath the seas of Krepsyc. Theirs was a peaceful, agrarian civilisation that tilled and lived among the great coral reefs. They had intelligence, and communication, but never developed technology, because really they didn’t need it.

They were, so the stories went, the happiest fish in the galaxy. Protected from aerial predators by the drifting ice floes above, they lived in comfortable, endless dark in the depths, and while they never invented even the most basic tools, they did have several advanced poetic forms.

This bliss was ended when a shoal of these peaceful fish-folk drifted into the waters near Mount Cataclysm – although there were as yet no land-dwellers to name it such – and heard the sleeping song of the god that dwelled beneath.

Although the Devourer of Innocents slept, and the presence of a number of fish wasn’t going to rise him from his endless slumber, his god-like dreams were enough to bend the minds of any entity that drifted too close. The Devourer sang in his sleep, and his dreams resonated with that song.

The night song of the Devourer was a discordant, angular chant, the sound of the time before time and the wild substances that ruled the universe before physics began. It was disruption and madness, the subconscious ramblings of a being beyond understanding.

To the fish people of Krepsyc, whose lives were dominated by the gentle currents of the ocean, it was a revelation. They drank it in, and then went out into the oceans and spread the song among their kind.

Steadily, the fish people abandoned their previous lives to come worship in the waters of Mount Cataclysm, and as they worshipped and sang, their proximity to the alien energies within the mountain, and the intensity of their faith, warped and twisted them, disrupting their piscine perfection.

They willed themselves to get closer to their god, and the mutations they developed allowed them to do so: their chests expanded to allow them to breathe air, and they rose to the surface to inhale hungry lungfuls; fins were superseded by jutting, angular limbs that allowed them to grab rock and begin to pull themselves up the side of the mountain.

It took generations for the first of the fish people to reach the top of Mount Cataclysm and begin to carve their temple out of the rock with the limbs they had grown due to the perversion of their flesh. By that point their gills had become virtually redundant, and they could not even bear to swim in the seas that had once been their home.

Enraptured by their god, they prized their hideous, mammalian features, embraced the extent to which their heritage had been left behind. The greater the impurity, it was presumed, the purer the faith.

So it was that, as the fish people became the Red Monks of the Screaming Doom, their Abbot was usually the one among their numbers most stricken, whose form had moved furthest away from their simple, underwater selves.

‘That,’ whispered Summerfield into Felterby’s ear, not taking her eyes off the Abbot, ‘is the sexiest man I have ever seen in my life.’

Felterby wasn’t sure why Summerfield felt the need to share this insight with him, but he nodded anyway.

The Abbot was a humanoid of more than average height, muscular with tanned skin, unkempt hair and a face covered in short stubble. He had a slight sheen to him and a vague, musky scent, as if he spent all day working in some form of hard, masculine labour. His piercing gaze suggested a hard, ruthless exterior but inner complexity.

Felterby acknowledged to himself that maybe he could see where Summerfield was coming from after all.

The novitiates that ran most of the public-facing aspects of the Temple had been less than keen to allow Felterby and Summerfield to have an audience with the Abbott, but a flash of Felterby’s paperwork had sorted that one out. They were hastily ushered into the Abbott’s meditation chamber and told to keep it quiet until he roused from his communion with the forces of infinite darkness.

The chamber was round, and covered in silks. High on the walls, barred shelves contained heretical volumes filled with arcane knowledge, and in the centre was a raised dais on which the Abbott

sat, clothed in dark red robes and muttering to himself in unspeakable tongues.

He didn't seem to notice Felterby and Summerfield, sat at the edge of the room on a richly silken surface that felt like bottom-numbing cold stone beneath the fabric. Instead he stared into the distance, his soulful eyes looking into some unimaginable other world.

Eventually, his head dropped forward, unconscious. A few seconds later, it snapped up again, those piercing yet strangely compassionate eyes staring straight at the two interlopers in his most private of sanctums.

'Outsiders, heretics, infidels,' the Abbot intoned, his voice a richly brewed baritone. 'What can we humble monks do for you today?'

'Outland Revenue,' said Felterby, flashing his ID. This, now this was the bit he was comfortable with. 'We're here for an audit.'

'An audit, you say?' boomed the Abbott, his eyes narrowing.

'Yes sir,' said Felterby wearily. 'An audit. Quite standard in these circumstances, especially in regards to faith-based organisations such as yourself, who claim considerable tax breaks as part of your status as a historic religion and charitable trust.'

'We are but humble worshippers,' the Abbott intoned, making an expansive gesture, the long sleeves of his habit trailing majestically through the air. 'Surely it is right that we do not pay the state while living in penury?'

'Of course, sir,' said Felterby, making a big fuss of checking paperwork he already knew backwards. 'But the figures submitted to the Outland Revenue to base these claims on are a little... vague.'

'Vague?' said the Abbott. 'Vague?'

'Vague,' repeated Felterby. 'I'm sure there's a perfectly good reason for this, and once we have seen the original accounts from which the statements you have made are drawn then -'

The Abbott laughed, a monstrous peal of diabolical mirth that rang around the meditation chamber. Then his laughter ceased, and he leaned forward intently.

'Do you think yourselves the first to look through these accounts, little mortal?' the Abbott hissed. 'Many have come before you, to look through the dark ledgers and examine the arcane spreadsheets. All have been driven mad by the experience, their minds boiled by calculations the mortal mind was never meant to run. What makes you think you are any different?'

'We are fully insured, sir,' said Felterby, knowing full well that Summerfield wasn't anything of the sort. 'If the risk is all ours, not yours, then surely you cannot object to us taking it?' He gave his best obsequious smile. 'It sounds like you don't have anything to lose, doesn't it?'

‘You may need these,’ said the novitiate tasked with escorting Felterby and Summerfield, passing them a pair of mouldy-looking blankets. ‘Although the surface is plagued by the daystar, the ruins below are considerably colder, enough to bring a slow creeping death to most warm-blooded creatures.’ He paused for effect. ‘I quite like it. It sharpens the mind.’

‘Good for you,’ said Summerfield. As the novitiate led the way she raised her blanket to Felterby, pointing out the design, pseudo-ethnic patterns surrounding a central image of a giant squid plaguing tiny stick people with bolts of baleful energy.

‘Very cheery,’ she hissed, too quiet for the novitiate to hear.

Blankets under their arms, they followed the novitiate down a long, winding staircase, each step of which was just slightly too high for the average humanoid to drop down. Felterby rapidly found his knees aching.

‘A long way down, these accounts of yours?’ asked Summerfield.

The novitiate turned to them. ‘Our finances are buried deep, deep beneath the ground, where mortals cannot see.’

‘Probably for the best,’ said Summerfield. ‘Don’t want those double entries seeping out and going crazy on the surface.’

The novitiate humphed and continued to lead the way.

As they walked, every few minutes Felterby could hear a vibration going through the weathered stone wall to their right.

‘Are we near some form of underground train line or mine?’ Felterby asked.

‘Sorry?’ said the novitiate.

‘The noise?’ Felterby said. Then he made a deep rumbling sound of his own.

Summerfield seemed aghast, shaking her head and miming at Felterby to shut up.

‘We are near the sleeper in the dark,’ said the novitiate. ‘He is many millennia old, and our most ancient and terrible god.’ He turned to continue leading the way, then added forlornly:

‘He cannot help it if he snores occasionally.’

They spent the rest of the descent in silence.

The Keeper of the Ledgers’ seniority showed in the moderate hideousness of his mammalian mutations – that is, as far as Summerfield was concerned, he was a bit less handsome than the Abbott, but still entirely acceptable.

‘Like a local vid personality,’ she told Felterby later in the day. ‘Or maybe an exceptionally well-tipped waiter.’

Compared to their cold welcome elsewhere, Felterby and

Summerfield found themselves warmly received by the Keeper, who seemed unlikely to get out very much. Each ledger was as tall as a man, and required an elaborate system of chains and pulleys to drag it off the dusty shelves, manoeuvre it to the observation table, and let it fall open.

By contrast to the weight and scale of each tome, the pages within were incredibly delicate, made from the pressed skins of some long-extinct, and no doubt very nervous animal. Velvet gloves and long callipers were required to turn each page, the vellum inscribed with a baffling mass of text, each individual character a millimetre high.

‘I think I need a better prescription,’ Felterby mumbled, trying to make out any of the text. He thought he had focussed on one string of symbols, towards the bottom of the page, but then his eyes began to roll back, a dark presence seeping into his –

Felterby was jerked back to consciousness by Summerfield dragging him back by his collar. She wagged a finger in his face.

‘Don’t look at the script that can drive men out of their minds in its raw form,’ she said firmly. ‘Because it will drive you out of your mind.’

‘Oh,’ said Felterby. ‘I thought that was just a metaphor.’

‘Apparently not,’ she replied. ‘Dig out your data slate, leave the translation to me.’

‘Translation?’ asked the Keeper, who seemed to be ‘helping’ them due to having little else to do.

‘She has the Codex Infernal,’ said Felterby, expecting it to sound grand, but realising just how stupid those words sounded as they exited his mouth. ‘At least, she said she did.’

‘The Codex Infernal!’ the Keeper echoed, with exactly the gravitas Felterby had failed to produce. ‘But no mortal can –’

‘Yes yes,’ said Summerfield, dragging a stool back a metre or so from the large reading table on which the ledger rested. ‘There seem to be a lot of things that mortals aren’t allowed to read without their brains boiling or what have you. I’m beginning to feel quite put out about it. Luckily I didn’t need to read the Codex, I just needed the underlying formulae.’

Summerfield stood on the stool, and produced a small comm from her trouser pocket. She squeezed the keypad in the centre of the comm, and various lenses and screens popped out, the device expanding to twice its original size in her hand.

‘Right, got that slate?’ she asked.

‘Here,’ said Felterby, waving his own woefully large and out-of-date OR computer at her. The screen jumped into green-on-black life in his hand. Then it froze whilst it booted up. Eventually it was ready to use.

‘OK, I’m syncing to you now,’ said Summerfield, tongue sticking out

of the corner of her mouth in concentration. Felterby gave up on any prospect of complaining that she shouldn't be able to hack into OR equipment so easily.

Summerfield's fingers danced over the holographic visuals her comm. projected into the air around her. 'Capturing base image, identifying text, applying formula, and...'

A holographic mass of changing symbols appeared above the page of the ledger, gradually settling into a galactic basic translation of the text itself. Felterby looked down to find a copy of the translated accounts on his dataslate.

'By the tentacles of the unspeakable one!' exclaimed the Keeper of the Ledgers, before running off for a soothing cup of herbal tea to steady his nerves.

Summerfield grinned, her face uplit by a holographic green glow. 'Yep,' she added. 'What he said.'

Felterby spent the rest of the day working through the accounts, deep in concentration. Aside from the translation issues, there were other odd aspects to the ledgers, transactions which were hard to comprehend.

He found himself involving Summerfield and the Keeper far more than expected, requesting cultural context and background information to try and comprehend how each item fitted with the others.

At other times he worked quietly, sometimes without even moving, just running the figures in his mind, letting the system of relationships slot together.

During these periods the Keeper would return to his own work while Summerfield would either sit around or, more often, disappear for an hour at a time, stalking off impatiently to explore the depths of the stacks, vanishing between shelves only to reappear an hour or so later.

All the while Felterby kept working, calculating and recalculating, comparing the figures in the ledgers to the statements provided to the Outland Revenue by the Red Monks.

Felterby didn't even notice that he had fallen asleep. He had been concentrating, his eyes closed, a web of figures connecting in his mind, when the next thing he knew was Summerfield gently shaking his shoulder. 'How long have I been out?' he asked.

Summerfield shrugged. 'Maybe ten minutes. I'm not surprised, you've been at it for hours.'

Deep within the mountain they had no concept of time, no natural light.

‘What time is it?’ he asked.

‘Late evening,’ Summerfield said, not unkindly. ‘Let’s get you back to the hotel.’

‘Back?’ said Felterby, creaking out of his chair and reaching for his jacket. ‘I haven’t even seen the place yet. Somewhere basic would be nice.’

The hotel was far from basic. A few miles down the coast from Mount Cataclysm, a little short of the main Fiesta!ville resort, the Grand was built along a strip of coastal cliff, six storeys of rooms clinging to the cliff-face.

Not that Felterby saw most of it to begin with. The grand foyer was at ground level, the highest point of the hotel, and it was all Felterby could see as his taxi approached. It was a narrow pavilion seemingly perched at the edge of the cliffs, with gleaming faux-marble pillars and a bright, welcoming glow from some rather gauche gaslit torches on either side of the entrance.

It was only having checked in and been given directions to his room that Felterby realised the majority of the building was tucked down the cliffside.

Rather than denying the hotel’s proximity to an ancient god that treated all mortal life as mere insect playthings, the Grand had worked a local theme into its decor, with a gold statue of the devourer in the lobby and an ethno-cataclysmic theme running through a lot of the design details.

Like all the others, Felterby’s room had a large balcony looking out to sea. As the room itself was stuffy in the late evening heat, he slid open the window and walked out on to the balcony. A pleasant sea breeze took the edge off the day’s heat, and distant, happy noises could be heard: laughter from the beach below, where small fires had been lit and dark figures could be seen running and dancing; music and chatter from above, where a band were playing in the hotel bar.

Felterby sat in a lounge chair on the balcony and let the noise wash over him. Beneath the sounds of merriment was the gentle back and forth of the tides, and he closed his eyes, hoping the rhythm of the sea would lull him to sleep.

It didn’t take long for him to realise it wasn’t going to happen. As someone who spent a lot of time working far from home, conducting investigations and audits on distant planets, he enjoyed the bland neutrality of business hotels, the off-white decor and functional furnishings. He had even redecorated his own apartment to an equivalent level of blandness, to the extent that visitors presumed it was a short-term rental.

Banalities were relaxing, it allowed the mind to reach out, undisrupted

by aesthetic interference.

Luxury was distracting. The Grand was distracting.

Felterby gave up on sleep and decided to get something to eat and drink. He found a corner table in the hotel bar, vaguely conscious of being the only person present who was sitting on their own. He almost wished Summerfield was there, but they had parted ways at the temple. Apparently, she had other arrangements.

So Felterby sat on his own, eating some local dish of barbecued vegetables in folded pastry, and drinking a fruit cocktail from half a purple nutshell with a straw in it, half-listening to the background babble of old friends, and couples, and families, and all the other people who had better reasons to be on this planet than wading through the financial details of a crazed sect of monster-worshippers.

After eating, Felterby took his drink down to the beach, where holidaymakers were still partying in the dark. Most of them had gathered by the shore. It was past midnight, and according to one of the conversations Felterby had overheard in the bar, turtles washed up after midnight would whisper prophecies if you held them to your ear.

A group of rat-like youths with jasmine-coloured fur were excitedly passing one of the crimson-shelled turtles around, each putting the creature's mouth to their ears before giggling and passing it on. Their enthusiastic laughter rippled across the moonlit beach.

Felterby looked down the coast, where the top of Mount Cataclysm could just be seen over the intervening cliffs, and wondered whether he should wade into the shallows and try for a prediction of his own, and what the turtle would say if he did.

The next day, work proceeded, with Felterby working back through historic ledgers for the previous couple of decades, making increasingly elaborate cross-references. Even though the temperature was chilly in the archives, Felterby found that he was working up such a sweat dragging ledgers around and climbing up to get a closer look at each page that he never got cold. He abandoned his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and worked through the whole day without a break.

A pattern was emerging.

In contrast to the previous day, when Summerfield had sent him home late when he seemed exhausted, it was Felterby's idea to pause for the night and pick things up on the third day. Summerfield seemed reluctant, nervous, but also equally reticent to actually justify or express her reservations. Instead they said their goodbyes, and she was gone before Felterby even left the room.

He didn't see her on the long climb to the surface. Something about her appearance that day had jarred with him, some detail that he couldn't quite place.

It was sitting on the moonlit beach by his hotel, listening to the turtle chatter once more, that Felterby realised – Summerfield was wearing the same clothes as she had the previous day. She had also been wearing the same outfit when she had visited Felterby in his office a few days earlier, he was sure of it. Not just similar clothes – Felterby himself wore pretty much the same type of suit and shirt every day, but there were subtle variations but the exact same clothes.

Perhaps she laundered them every night, Felterby thought, or bought identical items. Either way, the mystery of Summerfield's appearance was solved to Felterby's satisfaction, and the reason for the uniformity didn't matter.

He had more important things to think about. He lay back on the sand, looking up at the stars, not seeing, his mind full of swirling numbers, numbers that were dropping into patterns, patterns that were becoming more elaborate as connections wove between them.

Felterby reached the archives on the third day to find Summerfield already there, looking extra-furtive.

'We really need a breakthrough today,' she told him as soon as he arrived, without so much as a 'hello' by way of build-up.

'I think I have one,' Felterby replied. 'Give me an hour to check a couple of details.'

'Oh,' said Summerfield. 'Oh. OK.'

Then she sat quietly on a cold stone bench as Felterby checked his references, using the holographic overlay to mark certain entries in the accounts in different colours.

'Gotcha,' said Felterby. Both Summerfield and the Keeper looked up, the human from her bench and the monk behind his desk piled with ancient tomes.

Felterby beckoned them over, and explained.

'Your order has been on a very low tax bracket due to various charitable works and losses incurred, as shown in the submitted summary that the Outland Revenue receives here.' He showed the Keeper the documentation. 'Because that's just a summary, the losses are an aggregate, and even with translated accounts, it's hard to see the correlation, but if we take together these figures here, here and here.' Felterby's figures danced across the holograms, highlighting numbers in pink, then drawing them together to create a total. 'We have our "losses".'

'So everything is in order?' said the Keeper hopefully.

Not quite,' said Felterby, trying not to be smug. 'In fact, not at all. Because these smaller figures aren't losses or charitable payments at all, they're investments, re-routed through subsidiaries. Quite high-yield investments. Behind these supposed losses are substantial hidden

gains.'

The Keeper went a silvery grey, even by the standards of a man descended from a fish. Behind him, Summerfield raised two thumbs.

Half an hour later, Felterby and Summerfield were back in the presence of the Abbott. Instead of meeting him in his inner sanctum, they were instead ushered into a more functional office, containing a bare wooden table, a computer console and a coffee machine.

The Abbott took in Felterby's explanation with a grimace, then a shrug of resignation.

'I suppose there is a large sum to be repaid,' the Abbott said. The charisma seemed to have drained out of him, leaving a whiny-voiced husk.

'Considerable, including fines, and of course any interest for further late payments,' said Felterby, trying not to rub salt in the wound by being overly smug.

'Well tough,' said the Abbott spitefully. 'That money's gone. Whatever profits we made were wiped out when the market in Xlanthian blood bonds crashed last year. You can sue us for as much as you like, but the money isn't there.'

'The money may not be, but you have other assets,' said Summerfield, leaning forward in her chair. 'Assets that could be forfeit to reduce the bill.'

'What kind of assets?' asked the Abbott.

Summerfield told him.

The Abbott laughed. Then he coughed for a while, then he laughed again.

Finally, he became calm enough to talk: 'The Cleaver of Worlds? That's a myth.'

'A myth that I have very good eyewitness accounts for,' replied Summerfield. 'I want it.'

'Do you now?' said the Abbott, his eyes narrowing. 'Mr Felterby, exactly what authority does Professor Summerfield have to make such a request?'

'That's a private contractual matter,' said Felterby. 'But in this instance she is acting as our agent, and has our full backing of the Outland Revenue.'

The Abbott sat back in his leather swivel chair and rocked backwards, eyes still narrowed. Then he jumped to his feet.

'Very well then, follow me,' the Abbott said, opening the connecting door to his meditation chamber and ushering them through. 'But I warn you, though your actions may be legal, that does not make them right. The Cleaver has been kept here, protected, for millennia with good reason. Once it passes into your possession, any terrible

consequences are your own responsibility.'

Felterby and Summerfield exchanged glances as he stormed away. Before following, Felterby took a moment to speak to Summerfield:

'Are you absolutely sure you can handle this Cleaver?' Felterby hissed. 'Because the OR will not be held accountable for your -'

Bernice put a finger to his lips. 'This is entirely at my own risk,' she replied, keeping her voice low. 'I have my own insurance. Now come on.'

They followed the Abbott to a dark corner of the meditation chamber, where he pulled back one of the obscene tapestries on the wall to reveal a small stone room with a brass handrail. He stepped inside, and beckoned Felterby and Summerfield to follow him.

When they were in, the Abbott closed a small safety gate across the entrance, and began to turn a small crank in the wall.

As he turned the crank, the entire cell began to descend. Felterby and Summerfield held on to the handrail as most of the walls around them slid away, revealing that they were standing in a small stone basket running down a giant chain. The Abbott let go of the crank and it spun free, the crude elevator descending through a borehole that opened out into miscellaneous caves and tunnels as it fell.

'You mean we took all those stairs and there was a lift all this time?' said Summerfield.

'It is not usually accessible to outsiders,' said the Abbott bitterly. 'This elevator passes through our most sacred sanctums on the way to the Armoury of Immortals, and if you had not already proved yourself capable of unearthing any secret, I would not have brought you down here. Now, all our secrets are yours. Look!'

Felterby looked, and saw great open caverns where stairwells spiralled impossibly back on themselves, across the walls and over the ceilings, lines of robed monks chanting as they walked in sacred line up and down the stairs, looping forever. He saw halls of mirrors where portals to other dimensions opened and closed, and caught a glimpse of a giant eye passing across the other side of one such gateway. He saw chambers where collapsed statuary of long-forgotten saints had fallen from another cave above and lay broken across the floor.

And, briefly, he caught sight of something huge and terrible, something not entirely like, but quite like, a very large squid. It took up most of the space in a cave greater than any other, one so large that Felterby was surprised it didn't render the entire mountain unstable. Its many eyes were closed and its tentacles shuffled furtively, unconsciously.

As they passed to the chamber below, where their journey would come to an end, Felterby could still hear the snores of the sleeper echoing in his skull.

The elevator began to slow as it approached its destination, safety mechanisms tightening and bringing the basket to a steady halt.

The Armoury of Immortals had a vaulted ceiling, and statues of lost gods lined the walls.

On plinths before each god sat various objects. Some looked like weapons, being recognisably blades or cudgels of various kinds, albeit hewn from unidentifiable minerals or forged from indescribable metals.

Others were harder to identify: carved puzzle boxes, highly polished mirrors, and geometrically unlikely structures that floated above their respective plinths, there but not there.

Felterby and Summerfield followed the Abbott past all these weapons, and the hideous statues of the champions who wielded them until they reached a round iris pattern built into the ancient stone wall. Above the iris was carved a crude image of a planet being shattered in two.

‘This is the home of the Cleaver of Worlds,’ said the Abbott. ‘Legendary weapon of our Lord Devourer. It is said he once sliced through galaxies with it, then fed on the smaller parts.’

‘Lovely,’ said Felterby, then wished he hadn’t.

‘One second,’ said the Abbott. He walked over to a stone wheel inset near the iris, and began to turn it. The sounds of distant gears grinding were audible through the walls themselves, as ancient mechanisms rarely used shifted into life.

As the mechanism slowly opened the iris, dust falling from each retracting section, the Abbott turned to Summerfield.

‘There is still time to change your mind,’ said the Abbott. ‘Ours is a peaceful order, and we will not obstruct you in a lawful request, but there are followers in the wider universe who will not take the removal of one of our most sacred articles well. They may not react to such heresy lightly.’

‘Believe it or not, Abbott,’ said Summerfield, ‘I do not do this lightly at all. If there was any alternative, I wouldn’t even be here. Now, if you’ll excuse me, this has been a very, very long day.’

‘Very well,’ said the Abbott, bowing his head and reluctantly stepping aside.

With a resonant clunk, the stone iris opened, dust falling from each section as it retracted into a hidden cavity in the wall, revealing a shielded, round space within.

It was empty.

Summerfield turned to the Abbott. She didn’t say anything, but the question in her look was sufficient to squeeze an answer from the Abbott.

‘I had no idea,’ said the Abbott, tears of disbelief welling in his eyes.

He laughed out loud, then continued. 'The Cleaver exists on many plains of reality, in many different worlds and times simultaneously. It is a possession not just of our sacred lord the Devourer, but also his kindred in dimensions beyond our own. Its reality in any one of these dimensions is contingent on its status elsewhere. One of our Devourer's brethren must have taken possession of the Cleaver, perhaps in one of the speckled dimensions. It happens once every few centuries. I assure you, I had no idea it wouldn't be here now... but its absence truly is miraculous.'

The Abbott laughed again, almost dancing with joy.

'In other words, his brother ran off with it years ago, and the little sod hasn't given it back,' snapped Summerfield. 'Great. Just... great. You may be laughing now, but you have no idea what I could have preve-' She suddenly clammed shut, seething.

Felterby patted her on the shoulder, then thought again and took his hand away. He had never been particularly brilliant in difficult social and emotional situations, in spite of being sent on several workshops and day courses in such matters.

'Let's get some air,' Felterby suggested, leading her back towards the elevator.

And they did, leaving the Abbott to his laughter and prayers.

'I should never have come here,' said Summerfield. They had moved out into the temple courtyard. The mid-afternoon sun was harsh, but they found a cool patch in the shadow of a statue of the Devourer.

Summerfield gave the statue a rude hand gesture.

'Stupid bloody god,' Summerfield said. 'Can't even hold on to the one thing that mattered.' She sighed deeply. 'Definitely shouldn't have come here. Should have known that no matter how much I tried to twist the rules, it wouldn't work out.'

She went very quiet, another uncomfortable silence building. Felterby broke it with the question he had been wanting to ask for days:

'But what do you need the Cleaver of Worlds for?' he asked.

Summerfield sighed again, then looked at him very seriously for a while. She opened her mouth to start.

'Well...' she began, but a shout from across the courtyard stopped her in mid-thought.

'Package for Professor Summerfield,' bellowed the voice from across the courtyard. They turned to see a small hovervan parked up, lights still on and engine running. A short insectoid with six limbs, wearing a functional blue shirt and shorts, was dragging a large crate out of the back of the van, a clipboard stuffed under one of his spare arms.

'That's me,' said Summerfield, running to catch him up. Felterby

followed.

‘One empty crate, Professor,’ said the delivery man, his compound eyes glittering in the afternoon sun.

Summerfield nodded, and the delivery man got her to sign the clipboard in about eight places.

‘I believe you’ve also pre-paid for a pick-up and delivery, madame,’ said the mailman, pushing back his little cap with one thick-haired hand. ‘When would you like that?’

‘Oh, a couple of hours should do it,’ said Summerfield. ‘We’ll be all done by then.’ She forced a grin. ‘Gives you time to hit the beach?’

The delivery man wafted his cap across his face like a fan, and chuckled buzzily. ‘I wish madame, got a few deliveries to do locally before then. I’ll see you back here in two. Have a good afternoon now?’

‘We will,’ replied Summerfield weakly, waving him away.

Felterby looked at the crate. ‘Was this for the Cleaver?’ he asked. It was a coffin-shaped box, with air holes down the side and a liquid whiteboard taped to the top for delivery instructions to be scrawled in. ‘Looks a bit small, but then that’s meta-dimensional artefacts for you.’ He sighed. ‘Suppose you won’t need it now, unless you’re planning on sending home some souvenirs.’

‘Not exactly,’ said Summerfield. She kicked the bottom corner of the crate and it hovered a short distance off the ground. ‘I love these things. Best luggage in the universe, providing you don’t have someone with a voice close to yours. Nothing worse than delivery boxes getting confused and racing off across a crowded station platform.’ She gave a high whistle, and the box turned to her. ‘Come on sonny, let’s go for a wander.’

The box trailing behind, Bernice led Felterby to a quiet meditation cell off the main court. She leaned over and flipped open the box lid, and started fiddling with the padding inside.

‘I’m really sorry about this,’ she said.

It took Felterby a second to realise she wasn’t talking to the box, but to him.

‘Oh, all part of our job,’ he replied. ‘Besides, it’s you who have lost out. Now the accounts are translated, the OR can really get to work. We’re actually going to do quite well out of all this, so need to apologise for wasting my time.’

‘That wasn’t what I meant,’ said Summerfield, standing up straight and placing both her hands on his arms. Her palms felt warm and mammalian against his cool skin, a chill bristling through his flesh. She gave him a semi-hug, swinging him around the room. ‘I’m sorry about this.’

She took her hands away and stepped back. Felterby looked at her,

confused, groggily.

Felterby looked down. Where Bernice had slapped his arm, a patch of sticking plaster was attached to his grey skin. He was about to ask what the series of smaller and smaller cartoon letter 'Z's on the patch meant, but found that he couldn't move his mouth properly. He felt Bernice grabbing him under his arms as the cold crept down his legs and he began to fall and –

– a fierce rhythmic beep cut into Felterby's dreamless sleep, dragging him back to consciousness through layers of fog. He was somewhere warm, lying on soft padding, and the pressure to slide back into unconsciousness was powerful.

Felterby pushed through the weight that threatened to drag him back down. He forced his gummy eyes open. Something was resting to the left of his head, flashing red with every beep, a sole light in the dark. He lifted his right arm, bumping the elbow on a hard surface above, but managed to get his hand to the flashing object. He picked it up with numb, clumsy fingers, and angled it around so he could see it.

It was a cheap portable comm of the kind available in any small shop around the galaxy. The screen was flashing red, with a cartoon alarm clock dancing from side-to-side with the beeps. There were words:

Wake up! [Stop #].

Felterby pressed #. The clock disappeared and the alarm stopped. He would have closed his eyes automatically if it hadn't been for the alarming new message that appeared.

You are in a box. [Cont. #]

Felterby panicked and pressed #.

Don't panic! The lid is open. Push up, hard. [Cont. #]

Felterby wriggled onto his back, bashing his elbows again. When he was flat on his back, he placed his hands palm flat on the surface a foot above his face, and pushed.

As the message had promised, the lid came off easily enough. Once lifted it seesawed, and Felterby pushed it away in a random direction. He heard it clatter on a metal floor as he dropped his forearm back to protect his eyes from the clinical light outside the box. Blinking a few times to adjust to the light, Felterby sat up.

He was in a small, utilitarian room with a bed, a sink and other basics. Felterby was sitting in the packing crate Summerfield had ordered, which was on the floor. The crate had airholes in the side, and a series of religious symbols stencilled on in bright red. The lid was lying on the floor, and had the following message written on the top in 17 languages:

Live patient in recovery. Deliver to cabin 249. Do not place other objects on top of this crate, at risk of death and lawsuit.

Cabin 249. Felterby was on some kind of ship. But how had he...?

Felterby looked down at the patch with the 'Z's on it, still attached to the skin of his arm. He peeled it away, scrunched it up, and threw it at the grimy-looking wastebin under the sink.

A sedative. Summerfield had drugged him, and presumably dragged him here, or had him dragged here. Felterby wondered, his head still fuzzy from the drugs, exactly why? The Red Monks had nothing that Summerfield could steal, so what was the advantage of getting Felterby out of the way?

Felterby clambered out of the crate, his legs shaky as he did so, and stumbled over to the sink. Having splashed water on his face and drunk a couple of handfuls – it was brackish, no doubt on-board recycled – he felt a little steadier. He carefully walked back to the crate, picked up the comm and pressed #.

Will explain, but you need to get to the main viewing gallery on the next floor NOW. [Cont. #]

Felterby pressed #.

Seriously, now. Viewing gallery, one floor up. [Cont. #]

Felterby sighed, then surrendered, pocketing the comm and heading for the door.

The viewing gallery was exactly where the message had said. It wasn't up to much, a bit of dead space on what was, judging by the corridors Felterby had walked through to get there, a space freighter with limited berths for passengers.

It was a long room with a small bench, facing a room-long window looking out on to the stars. The blue sphere of Krepsyc took up most of the view.

Felterby sat on the bench and took out the comm. He pressed #.

Next msg time locked 1:37.

The counter started to tick down a second at a time: 1:36, 1:35... Felterby tossed the comm on to the bench next to him, and looked out at the tranquil planet below. Whatever this ship was called, it was out of orbit and moving away from the planet, presumably waiting to get to safe distance before jumping to light. The slowly shrinking planet was a peaceful sight, starlight on water.

Felterby's eyes began to close again, the lids heavy, ever so heavy... then the light woke him up.

It was a ripple of energy, as fierce as any he had ever seen. It came from somewhere outside the gallery's range of vision, floating across empty space, purple and orange crackles intertwining as it drifted through the void. It must have been huge, although Felterby had no

sense of scale to compare it to.

When it hit Krepsyc, he realised just how big it was – from end to end the ripple was longer than the world below, with the centre of the ribbon catching the planet in the centre of one of its oceans. As it made contact, the ribbon folded around the planet, tendrils of energy splitting off from each other to gather the unfortunate world in a tight embrace, fingers digging through the atmosphere and towards the planet's core.

The surface of Krepsyc frothed and glowed. Whether it was the atmosphere or the land which was burning, Felterby couldn't tell, until it was over.

There was no explosion, no shockwave to hit the freighter, not even a release of light. Just sudden darkness, and a once-blue world was left grey and dull, a burnt-out sphere in the sky. The energy ribbon that had eradicated all life from the planet was gone, consumed by its own fury.

A gentle beep came from the comm on the bench. Felterby leaned back to pick it up – he hadn't even noticed himself getting to his feet, but he had – not wanting to take his eyes off the spectacle of the corpse-world before him.

The message on the comm was longer than the previous ones, and broken up into staccato bites of text. Felterby read the whole thing, line by line, scrolling through with #. Then he scrolled back, reading the entire thing in reverse. Then he read it one final time, in order. In total, it read like this:

What you have just seen is 'collateral damage', not a hostile act.

I wish I could have avoided bringing you here, and that you might only have found out about Krepsyc's demise from a news report, and I am truly sorry for what I have brought you close to, really. No-one should have to see this.

However having been here, I hope that seeing this destruction, accidental not targeted, will help you to understand the severity of the situation, and why it was so important that, if the Cleaver existed, that it be brought to bear to stop the war that is coming to you, and which I have been watching unfold for several months. Even though we failed, I had to try.

I hope you will not feel guilt for surviving Krepsyc. You need to know this – we were never there. Krepsyc's destruction had already happened, and nothing could be done to save it. I took us in between the lines of history already written, and took us out before we could become part of the text.

If this seems cruel, both to you and those who have died, I apologise. Coming back in time to try and retrieve the Cleaver before Krepsyc's destruction was risky enough without also trying to save those who had

died. Or letting you die when you should have lived.

Trust me – and I know that's rich coming from me right now – but that sort of behaviour got us into this mess, which is why I'm treading carefully.

Look after yourself. The days ahead will be difficult. Thank you for all your help, and take comfort that the effort was worth making, even if we failed.

If we survive, I hope to see you in better circumstances.

Your eternal debtor, minus acceptable allowances and costs.

Professor Bernice Summerfield.

Felterby sat on the bench, looking out on to the dead planet. If he was the survivor, how come he felt like the ghost? Was this how Summerfield felt all the time, dipping into the lives of others, blessed and cursed with foreknowledge and responsibilities?

He didn't know quite what to think. There were shouts from somewhere in the rest of the ship – clearly the death of Krepsyc had been noticed by some of the crew. There would doubtless be panic, and despair, and the urgent relaying of bad news. They might be delayed to wherever they were going, and who knew how Felterby would make his way back to the Hollow. He realised, without feeling any reaction either way, that he didn't know which direction the ship he was on was going.

Maybe Summerfield had accounted for that as well, or maybe not.

If the march of history was as inevitable as Summerfield had implied, then it would all become clear in due time.

For now, Felterby was aware of the flow of events around him, but felt still.

He sat there quietly, not quite part of things, on the sidelines.

Out of time.

Interlude

Eddie Robson

The prison ship didn't materialise in its scheduled spot. The prisoners didn't know this, because their captors didn't bother to tell them, and there were no exterior windows in the hangar where they were kept. Instead they sat in the tiny booths they'd been allocated – like cubicles in an open-plan office, but with beds instead of desks – and wondered what was taking so long. They were meant to be disembarking by now. As the minutes went by, the background chatter in the hangar rose. The prisoners were exchanging theories, some better informed than others.

Cordel lay on his bed, letting it wash over him. He didn't care about the reasons for the delay. Surely none of them were in any hurry to get there?

May – a chubby young flight technician who had been in the bunker with Cordel when they'd been captured, the last two survivors of their evacuation party – stood on her bed and leaned over the partition. 'Did you feel that?' she asked.

'Feel what?' Cordel replied.

'We're travelling in realspace again. Everywhere else this ship's gone, it's ported.' May had already expressed awe at the power the Deindum's ships could generate, teleporting hundreds of light years in a single jump.

'So what does that mean?' asked Cordel, playing along.

'I don't know. Maybe they just put us down in the wrong place.'

'That doesn't seem like the sort of thing they do.'

'I know.' May chewed a fingernail. 'I'm going to have a wander.'

She vanished into the milling crowds inside the hangar for about half an hour. The background babble diminished, then – almost imperceptibly – it increased again. In spite of himself, Cordel wondered what had prompted this.

He didn't have to wonder for long. May returned and sat on the end of his bed.

'Apparently there's a new prisoner,' she said.

'Is that all?' asked Cordel.

'But that's just it though,' May replied. 'There's just the one. And it sounds like the whole ship's been diverted just to get him. That's funny, isn't it?'

Cordel shrugged. 'There's aliens and there's aliens. And the Deindum are aliens, if you get what I mean. They do things we can't

remotely understand.'

The babble rose in pitch again. People started moving towards one side of the hangar. May stood up on Cordel's bed, peering over the tops of the partitions to see what was going on. 'I think...' she said. 'I think they've brought him in.' She stepped down off the bed and moved with the flow of people.

When she returned, she looked baffled.

'Did you see him?' asked Cordel.

'No,' said May. 'I tried, but the crowds were too big. Weird rumour going around though.'

'What's that?'

'People are saying he used to be Irving Braxiatel's gardener.'

Cordel waited some time before going to see the newcomer. Once the crowds had died down, Cordel sought out his cubicle and found a creature encased in a bulky encounter suit. Cordel guessed he was either Aventi or Yesodi. When the new prisoner introduced himself as Hass, Cordel assumed the latter: Hass sounded like a Yesodi name. It was hard for Cordel to read the other man through his suit, but he seemed very calm and measured. Some people were like that when they got captured – one way or the other, the war was over for them. For his own part, having been so close to the centre of this war, Cordel doubted it would be that clean.

'I heard a rumour,' said Cordel.

Hass didn't respond, just waited for Cordel to continue.

'I heard you used to be... Irving Braxiatel's gardener?' It sounded absurd and Cordel immediately wished he hadn't said it.

But then Hass told him it wasn't a rumour. It was what he had been telling anyone who asked.

'Oh right,' said Cordel. 'I worked with Braxiatel, just recently. At his command centre.'

Hass looked up at Cordel. 'But not any more.'

'No. Compromised from the inside. A Deindum android, heavily disguised with organics. Nearly killed us all. We managed to seal the complex with it inside, we think we took it out, but – bloody hell, you know what these things are like.'

'I do, yes. Did Braxiatel himself survive?'

'I think so. The evacuation was chaos – that's how I got captured. But I assume he got out.'

'I assume so too. He always finds a way.'

Cordel crouched down. 'That's what I thought. When I started working with him, you just can't believe how clever the guy is. He's thought of everything, including all the things you're thinking. And he seemed so confident that he'd find a way, for us all to win... but the

last few weeks, he went a bit odd. Manic at first, then quiet. He'd sit there reading the news and the summaries, and he just... didn't seem to have any ideas any more.'

Hass slumped back against the wall. 'We are losing.'

Cordel drew a deep breath, then nodded.

'I suspected this would happen,' Hass continued. 'Braxiatel has been fighting this enemy for some time. He has only succeeded in worsening the situation.'

'You're more than just his gardener, aren't you?'

'I'm not sure it's wise to admit to being anything else.'

'This ship went out of its way to pick you up, didn't it?'

'Yes. It swallowed my ship whole.'

'You must be important, for them to go to all that effort.'

'I suppose I must.' A hissing noise came from within the suit. 'It's possible that they just wanted to thank me in person.'

Cordel shook his head, puzzled.

'I made them exist. I didn't know what I was doing, but in a sense this is all my fault, you see. They probably know that. Perhaps they'll put me in a museum...'

A dull tone sounded loudly and repeatedly across the hangar.

'That's our cue to leave,' said Cordel.

'We're here?'

'Yeah,' said Cordel, standing. 'Maximeditas.'

Excalibur of Mars

Jim Smith

Future Past

The Santa Diana University College of Mars had been founded as a centre of learning excellence. Or at least that was what the subheading on the cover of Bernice's battered, once-glossy brochure said. She couldn't actually see the year that it had been founded, because there was a large crease running down the cover and said crease was filled with the crusty remains of some gelatinous foodstuff at the exact point that it intersected with the subheading. The substance in the crease smelled faintly spicy and she briefly had to resist a repellent urge to lick it to find out what it was. Bernice had visited UCM, as it was often known, on a single occasion over a decade before and she couldn't claim to be familiar enough with the institution to validate its claims. She'd barely even heard of the place before the archaeology faculty on her then home planet of Dellah had decided that she should attend a conference there. She'd blamed this on her being, as she was then, a few years adrift from her own 'native' era rather than on any sloppiness on her own part. She'd spent a few hectic days at what was probably one of the more adventurous archaeological symposia ever held (and surely the only one ever to involve both the surgical removal of a human heart and weapons of mass destruction). Since then she'd barely given the place, or its academic pedigree, a single moment's thought.

Bernice had initially kept the brochure for the conference because it contained some vouchers for money off various academic publications that she was lying to herself about the possibility of using. It had spent several years in a drawer, and a few more in a box. Periodically she'd discovered it, sniffed the cover, tried to flatten out a few of the more serious scratches and bends and never quite found the commitment to discard it. After a while, she'd starting keeping it because she'd had it for so long that throwing it away now seemed like some sort of incredibly abstract betrayal.

Then Jason had died, and the stupid and not entirely complimentary note he'd scribbled on the inside back cover had become incredibly important to her. After that, throwing it away would have felt like a betrayal of a far more concrete sort. The brochure had assumed, if not pride of place, then certainly a singular position, in a collection of items related to her late lamented former

husband, a surprisingly large number of which had unidentifiable food stains on them.

What Bernice had never quite expected was for the brochure to potentially have some actual, vital use. In the current situation she and her allies needed every advantage they could borrow, scrape or steal over their opponents. While this didn't extend to a plan to go to war using tattered brochures autographed by dead men as cover, it had sent her scurrying back to the UCM brochure. There was an article on various ancient Martian treasures in it, including photographs of a chamber deep in the bowels of the planet that was reputed to be the reliquary devoted to a particular ancient Martian sword. The sword was gone, now, of course. It had apparently disappeared centuries before the article was written, but thousands of years after the tomb was built. The curious thing was that nobody had ever been able to get inside the small sword room – just take pictures of it from outside.

Research on when the sword had been there, or if it had ever been there, was hazy and irritatingly contradictory. It was, however, said to have some basic space-warping powers and/or a sonic blade. Also: a jewelled handle, probably containing gemstones that were themselves useful in the powering of heavy machinery. The scabbard, if it had one, would probably have the common ancient Martian property of low-level healing nanos built into the skin. One wondered why it had been left in a chamber to gather dust in the first place, but that was by the by. In the event that the Deindum decided to attack the Collection – an attack which Bev was convinced must surely happen soon – it would be a pretty useful trinket.

So Bernice decided to steal it.

Future Present

It was the first thing that all the relevant, rival agencies had agreed on for decades. The Ambassador for the rival bloc had sent along his tame astronomers to confirm the findings of the Anglophone Congress's research team, and that was an unheard-of occurrence. It was, in short, all rather surprising. Because what was happening was so phenomenally unlikely that any agreement that it was happening should, it seemed, have been impossible to reach. Yet that agreement was swift in forthcoming and reached with a minimum of fuss. It was as if the various improbabilities had evened each other out. Or that, in the face of insurmountable evidence, even the most politically motivated of figures had shrugged their shoulders and said 'Yeah, that...' even though 'that' was 'The moons of Mars are leaving their orbits, seemingly under their own power and we have absolutely no idea how, never mind why.'

Winifred Bambara felt she'd done more than her fair share of jumping out of moving objects. From her training with the paratroop regiment to involvement in some of the 'acrobatic' actions of the recent lunar skirmishes, it couldn't be denied that she'd flown, fallen, leaped and occasionally stumbled out of more and many different vehicles (flying and otherwise) than even most people in her line of work. What she'd never done, up until today, was fall to sea level from the upper stratosphere of a planet while wearing a two-thousand-year-old suit of armour. To be honest, it had never been on her list of 'things to do'.

Decades ago, Winifred and her husband, Knight-General Ancelyn Ap Gwalchma had been presented with a very special request from a friend of a friend. In agreeing to it they had accepted custody of a sword of a very specific vintage. It was, and Winifred appreciated that this was ridiculous every time she thought of it, Excalibur. The actual Excalibur. Or rather an Excalibur from a parallel universe where King Arthur the man was a good deal closer to King Arthur the myth. That was the kind of thing you had to cope with if you worked in UN special forces; and were married to a man who'd been born in a different universe.

At more or less the same time that the news agencies in the Eurozone had started to report the exponentially increasing, and entirely inexplicable, movement of Mars' moons away from the planet, Excalibur had started to behave rather oddly. Now, it would seem to some (the sort of people who weren't married to a man from another universe, say) that a sword 'behaving' in any way at all would be in and of itself rather odd. Excalibur though was, if not actually sentient, then certainly possessed of elements of personality. It frequently beeped and squeaked. The light in its handle glowed red without apparent reason. The sword's blade changed temperature suddenly and frequently, with a rushing noise that popped the ears as the air around the weapon was either superheated or had all the heat pulled from it in seconds. The sword could, in theory, cut reality itself; and it certainly had the ability to detect disruptions in the fabric of space-time and, on occasion, fling itself towards them as if dragged by a force not entirely unlike magnetism. (This was something a war party of time-travelling Xlanthi had found out to their cost in the famous Henley Picnic Massacre of '19.) Eventually, based on some decoding of the sword's more formal noises he'd carried out, Ancelyn had come to the conclusion that Excalibur was being attracted to, or was possibly responsible for, whatever was happening on Mars. For a skilled operator, using the sword to travel a short interplanetary distance was easy, especially if you had a bio-nodal suit of armour of the kind used to travel between star systems and realities, never mind

worlds. Ancelyn had such a suit. It was how he'd arrived on this world; and while it was probably not up to jumping to a parallel universe and back, he was pretty confident that he, it and the sword could do the journey of several million miles to Mars and back in order to investigate what was going on.

When Winifred, with her UN hat on, had argued this in front of representatives of all the interested parties, they'd agreed surprisingly swiftly. Almost certainly because they had no other suggestions as to how to make progress with understanding what was occurring on or around Mars. The Americans had a ship that could get that far, but no fuel. The UAE had the fuel but no ship; and while they were all still agreed that whatever was happening above Mars was happening, they didn't want to help each other out. This was despite the fact that the gravitational disruptions coming from Phobos and Deimos were rapidly approaching the point where they'd disrupt shipping between Earth and the Moon. So, it was decided that Ancelyn would repair his armour as best he could, place Excalibur in his control glove and let it take him to Mars. It was all arranged. And then Ancelyn had broken his leg playing a charity football match organised to raise funds for his Squires Academy in Wessex.

Which was why his wife had just crashed into a clump of dusty red Martian terrain wearing a suit of armour designed for someone six inches taller than her.

This was the thirteenth time Bernice had arrived in the chamber to find that it didn't contain what she was looking for. She opened the door to the sword room, again – it always opened perfectly easily – but couldn't get inside. Some kind of barrier prevented it. Ah well, no sword, no point.

Bernice was making short hops back in time to try and conserve the time ring's power. It was making the whole process aggressively tedious, to be honest. The first time she'd arrived in the chamber she'd been overawed. The ancient architecture of Mars was often magnificent, even in ruins, but here in the fairly recent past (she reckoned she'd got about as far back as the early twenty-second century, give or take) it was, by definition, much 'newer' than any early Martian building she'd ever seen. So that had been brilliant. The first time.

The second to fifth times it'd been pretty good.

Then she'd got a bit bored.

Between the sixth and eleventh times she'd become interested in the peculiar organic technology that was grafted onto parts of the building work. Bio-organic weapons, armour and so on weren't unknown to Mars, of course, but these various hard, lumpy, faintly compost-

smelling controls didn't look like any Martian tech she'd seen. Then she'd lost interest, partially because the jumping though time was beginning to disorient her, and partially because she was beginning to worry that she was travelling in the wrong direction. Bits of the tomb, and certainly the bio-organic bits, seemed to be worsening in their condition the further she went back into the past. With no real way of knowing, beyond her pocket chronometer and the information the time ring snuck into her head, if she was going in the right direction or not, she was beginning to think that this had, in fact, been a terrible idea from the start – one brought on by the grinding desperation of the situation in the 'present'. She decided to give up, and that was when someone kicked the door of the tomb down from the outside. This was pretty shocking because Bernice hadn't noticed the door and hadn't considered the possibility that she'd got far enough into the past that the building had an 'outside'.

A figure stood highlighted, quite dramatically actually, in the door. It was in armour, with a full face plate, and carrying an enormous sword of exactly the kind that would fit into the environment they were in. It was, it seemed very likely, the missing piece of the puzzle. It was just a shame that somebody else was holding it.

The armoured figure started slightly as it noticed Bernice. It moved forward and as it did so, the eyes visible through the slit in the mask made it obvious to Bernice that the person in the armour was female.

'Don't I know you?' asked a voice with a Northern English accent. 'You're Bernice Summerfield, aren't you? You came to my wedding.'

After Winifred had removed her armour and she and Bernice had established that each really was who the other thought they were, they'd quickly caught up. They swapped explanations as to how they'd got to Mars here and now and what it was they were doing there. Winifred had asked Bernice to tell her 'everything' and in response Bernice had given her a look that more than implied that she was unhappy with the possibility of having to explain anything, never mind everything, and instead kept it simple. She'd skipped over as many of the details of altered timelines and Irving's machinations as she could. She'd had to explain the search for the sword, of course, and then it had been Winifred's turn. Bernice had listened with genuine interest as Winifred had explained about the threat of Mars' moons leaving orbit. Obviously Bernice's chronometer had been slightly off, although not by as much as she'd worried about. She'd not anticipated that today would be, of all things, the moment of Phobos and Deimos' migration.

Bernice knew about this event, from her own past. It was a famous historical mystery, one of those things from school which everyone

remembered, along with oxbow lakes and the date of the Battle of Hastings. She briefly considered not mentioning this to Winifred at all, but then decided that the worst thing telling her could accomplish would be stopping her worrying unduly.

‘The inexplicable loss of the Martian moons is an established historical event,’ said Bernice. ‘I’m afraid they’re not coming back. With no human population on Mars at the time there was no-one to properly observe it happen.’ The best research anyone could come up with suggested that the two moons had simply drifted away, causing some small local gravity disruptions, albeit ones of a far smaller magnitude than maths dictated that they should. No one knew why. Or how. It was the sort of curio people spun into conspiracy theories or made rubbish documentaries about. There was even a terrible film set during it. A film she’d had to watch with a boyfriend so far in her past she wasn’t sure what he looked like, never mind what he was called. (In fact, she was fairly certain Jason had written an erotic historical novel using the background of the moons’ disappearance as a starting point, but she didn’t mention this.)

Winifred was, if she was honest, slightly bemused by Bernice’s laid-back attitude to the situation, but eventually concluded that if you couldn’t trust a proven time-traveller to reassure you about tomorrow, who could you trust? ‘What I want to know,’ she said, tapping the legendary sword on the ground, ‘is this: why does Excalibur so badly want to be brought to Mars, if it can’t bring back the moons?’

Bernice indicated one of the walls of room they were in, pointing out an internal window. Winifred walked over to it and looked through the glass into what Bernice was busily telling her was the empty sword chamber; the empty sword chamber she’d seen photographs of in the future. As Winifred squinted into the dimly-lit annex, Bernice was theorising out loud that Excalibur wanted to come here, to Mars, to be placed in a room that, to be absolutely obvious about it, looked like it had been designed to contain it.

‘So,’ said Winifred, interrupting her. ‘I must be here for a reason. What am I meant to do? This Martian chamber, obviously ancient, was designed to accommodate a sword.’ She held up Excalibur. ‘I’ve got a sword. It didn’t come from here – it’s from another universe – but maybe it goes here.’

‘But I’ve visited this chamber several times between then and now. There’s never been any sign of Excalibur or any other sword. Not even a paper knife.’

Winifred opened the door to the sword room and attempted to enter it. ‘That won’t work,’ said Bernice.

Bernice was right. Winifred couldn’t get over the threshold – as if she was a vampire. ‘Shame,’ said Winifred, giving the air a kick. It was

like kicking rubber.

Bernice pointed out that she'd also done that herself, a dozen times, in her recent past/the near future, and that it hadn't done any good then either. At this Winifred scowled, looked back into the sword room, and kicked the air again for good measure. 'Where's this force field being generated from?'

'Actually,' said an unfamiliarly-accented person behind her, 'There is no force field.'

Winifred turned round to see a hologram flicker into existence in the middle of the room.

It was of a scruffy man in a long, raggedy afghan coat. He was wearing an eye-patch; one which was barely visible beneath a long, asymmetric fringe of red hair.

'Merlin?' said Winifred – an educated guess, based on her husband's descriptions.

Merlin coughed politely and greeted them, apologised for dragging them into what was one of his more elaborate schemes and then apologised again for sending an interactive holographic avatar rather than turning up to explain himself, but he had somewhere else to be.

At this, Bernice swore under her breath, then said 'Hello, you git,' in the hologram's general direction.

The hologram winked its single eye in a way that was clearly meant to be reassuring but which was actually quite creepy.

'Hello Bernice,' it said.

Then it asked them if they would be so kind as to put Excalibur in its proper place in the sword room as if to do so was the most natural and obvious thing in the world.

They asked it why, and it explained that it was necessary in order to ensure Mars' moons never left the planet.

'That boat's sailed,' said Winifred. 'The moons went. They're gone. If you've got a moon magnet handy, we might be able to bring them back...'

The hologram sighed and told them that it was necessary to keep Mars' moons in place in the past. Then it began to launch into a longer explanation.

Bernice cut him off.

'Hang on. This is to do with all that Arthurian stuff about you living backwards, isn't it?' she asked, partially rhetorically, partially to make sure he didn't do all the talking himself.

He nodded. 'That's why I brought you here.'

'You brought me here?' said Bernice. 'I am actually in the middle of something, you know.'

'Ah, yes!' said Merlin. 'The Deindum. Yes, it was they who caused the moons –'

“It was they who?” said Bernice. ‘You don’t have to talk like that with us, this isn’t the Round Table, you know.’

‘Sorry. The Deindum drew the moons away.’

‘The what?’ asked Winifred. ‘Who? Why?’

‘I’ll explain the who later,’ said Bernice. ‘He can explain the why. Why?’

‘There’s potential for the moons to be used as a power source,’ said Merlin. ‘Involving an otherdimensional weak spot at the heart of Phobos.’

‘Another dimension?’ said Winifred. ‘Like Ancelyn’s?’

‘Not as nice as Ancelyn’s,’ said Merlin. ‘And it’s on the verge of collapse. Some of the energy given off by its collapse will be trapped in there. As it was in Earth’s back yard, the Deindum hoped to get them out of the way before you found that out. This was the closest point to your time that they could attempt this. Which is why I built this chamber, in the future.’

Bernice turned to Winifred. ‘He wants us to ask him to explain.’

Winifred tutted. ‘I’m too old to piss about with this. Go on – enlighten us.’

‘Within the sword room,’ said Merlin, ‘time runs backwards. That’s why you can’t get inside. So, Bernice, what I need you to do is use your time ring to compensate.’

Bernice thought for a second. ‘Ah. I think I understand.’

‘Do you?’ asked Winifred.

‘Yes. Give me the sword.’

Winifred shrugged and did so. Bernice hefted it in her hand – it was a reassuring presence. Shame she couldn’t take it back with her.

She stepped to the door and pulled it open, then braced herself –

– and stepped inside, telling her time ring to start taking her back in time at a constant speed of two seconds per second as she did so. It worked. She was in.

She felt ill. The compensation was far from perfect. Time was strobing through her head.

As quickly as she could manage, Bernice popped Excalibur on its stand – it wasn’t quite straight, but it’d have to do – and dashed back out of the room, deactivating the ring as she did so.

Bernice rushed past herself on the way out and threw up in the corner. By the time she looked up, her other self had gone into the sword room. The timeline had changed. Now, this had always happened.

Once the door was closed, Bernice and Winifred walked away. Merlin hovered behind them. When they reached the surface of Mars, they looked up into the night sky and saw that the moons had already returned.

‘The sword’s presence has not only drawn back Phobos and Deimos,’ said Merlin, ‘it has acted as an anchor in the past, ensuring the attempt to dislodge them failed. And any further attempt to dislodge them will also fail.’

‘So when Bernice gets back to her future,’ said Winifred, ‘The history she knows will have changed? The moons will always have been there?’

‘Top of the class, Winifred,’ said the Merlin hologram. ‘When you arrived, the sword wasn’t there – it had never been there. Now it has been there as long as anyone can remember.’

‘So there’s no crisis,’ said Winifred. ‘Which probably means everyone back home is wondering where the hell I am.’ She turned to Merlin. ‘The sword was the power source of my flight armour. How am I meant to get home now?’

‘Don’t worry, Winifred,’ said Bernice. ‘I’ll give you a lift.’ Then she turned to Merlin. ‘What if the Deindum try to remove Excalibur? They’re handy with backwards-time stuff themselves, you know.’

‘I’ll go back and lock the door in the past,’ said Merlin. ‘I think I can make sure they don’t get in.’

‘Does me picking up the sword fit into your plans, at all?’

‘Not yet,’ he replied. ‘Excalibur will be needed to anchor the moons for, oooh, several million years at least. The Deindum may go back further and try again otherwise. You can collect it when its work is done, after that you can do what you like with it.’

Bernice nodded. ‘I don’t suppose there’s anything else you can do to help? We’re pretty desperate there, you know.’

Winifred flashed a concerned look at Bernice. Bernice wondered how much it was wise to say in front of her. Nobody should have to live with the knowledge of what was coming.

Merlin’s smugness faded. ‘I’m sorry. If I could take more direct action than this, I wouldn’t have dragged you back here at all, I’d have done it myself. Circumstances dictate I stay where I am, I’m afraid.’ He smiled as the hologram faded from sight. ‘But you’ll do well. I trust you.’

Past Future

The door to the sword chamber slid open slowly and with some difficulty. Here in the past the bio-organic machinery was ancient. It had, and there was no other way of putting it, gone off. The window was smeared with centuries’ worth of ooze and the locking mechanism was, essentially, slop, looking like a cross between mouldy bread left out in the rain by a careless refuse collector and rotting algae. At least seventy percent of it had disintegrated, at Bernice’s estimate.

Well, she thought ‘estimate’ was overselling it; it was really just a

guess. And by 'guess' she meant 'smart alec remark'. And by 'smart alec remark' she meant 'internal monologue that she thought she'd grown out of and was quite annoyed to realise she still used'. She told herself to shut up, even though she'd not said anything. Then the door widened enough for her to be able to see into the sword chamber and she started swearing. Loudly.

The plinth was there in all its icky, organic ingloriousness, stinking like the worst compost heap in history. What was worse was that Excalibur had gone. The absence of its presence was overpowering. The room was as empty of its centrepiece as it was in the pictures she'd first seen at UCM a decade ago in the future.

A piece of new-looking, sharp-cornered paper was sitting on the plinth, clearly carefully placed to avoid it soaking up any of the ooze from the more rotten areas. Scrawled across it in familiar handwriting was a brief apology for the removal of the sword and an even briefer one for deliberately tricking her, albeit inadvertently. It turned out that the sword's journey through time was even more complex than her correspondent had anticipated. So he'd taken it away for safe keeping. He knew that this would be frustrating for her, but keeping the weapon from her enemies was surely better than nothing? It would, he assured her, all turn out all right in the end. The note finished with a jovial 'See you earlier,' and an illegible signature.

This was the point where she gave up and went home.

The End Times

Jonathan Blum

The past smelled of sweat, shit, and smoke. It was way too hot for his fur out here, and the fields they were riding past stank – they were really laying on the fertiliser. Funny, he'd thought volcanic ash was supposed to be good for the soil... maybe not when there was this much of it. It must have smothered the crops, so now they were throwing anything they had on hand at it, trying to make it better.

Mum was talking awkwardly to the priest leading the way. She hadn't let Peter have a horse of his own, he had to share hers, but at least that made it easy to get her attention. 'So what do we do when we get there?'

Mum had that lot-on-her-mind look. She took a deep breath. 'Well. Did you do the background reading I gave you?'

'...Some of it.'

'Some of it. Which book?'

'The big art one with all the short stories. Enduring Myths.'

Mum grinned wickedly. 'Well of course, that one. It was the illustrations, right? Because that's the one with all the nipples in –'

'– Mum! –'

'Gotcha. Let that be a lesson to last you through your teenage years – you cannot shock Mum. I was shocking years before you were born.'

'– c'mon, Mum, it's not like they even have any fur –'

'Anyway. Mount Iuktas. The Caves of the Wind. Did you get to that bit?'

'I think.'

'All right, then, you tell me.'

The mountain was a few kilometres ahead of them, the track snaking round its base. That priest was leading them all through the sunburnt fields, while the other priests and priestesses on their horses snaked along the track behind them.

'It's where Zeus was born, right?'

Mum nodded. 'And his mother Rhea hid him from the world, so his father Cronus wouldn't eat him alive. Not keen on potential rivals, Cronus.'

'He's not hanging around there, is he?' he asked dubiously.

'No. It's Rhea I'm after.'

That pile of rubble there must have been a house before the earthquake. Wasn't as neat as the splintered boat they'd found in the lowlands, on their way to Knossos in the first place – thrown inland by

the tsunami, bleached and rotting in the sun.

The palace at Knossos at least had been pretty cool – running water, they even had flush toilets, sort of. Somehow he didn't think this temple they'd be staying at would be so civilized. Shame they hadn't got to meet this King Idomeneus, but Mum said this priest could give them the answers they needed. Or, give *her* the answers – whatever voodoo Mum had done to be able to speak Ancient Greekish or whatever, she hadn't let him in on it. So all he'd been able to do was hang about the court, let her show him off, and do a few mock-growls to make the little girls giggle. But the least she could have done was make it so he could talk to the others.

The priests at the back of the caravan were riding with a boy – a skinny-looking kid, maybe a year or two older than him. Dark hair, dark eyes, kind of sunken. He looked a bit ill, slumped dispiritedly, like he might fall off his horse... like he could use some severe divine intervention. A priestess sitting behind held him in place.

'What's with the boy?'

Mum drew a pained breath.

'Not now. Later.'

She should be seeing this as research. Really, this was the sort of opportunity generations of archaeologists before her would have killed for. Even after they'd cracked Linear A they'd still had next to nothing to go on about what happened in the late Minoan period: how the people who'd looked up one morning, seen the wall of water wipe their towns from the land below, and survived, had been changed by what they'd lost. How had they faced a life reduced to matchsticks and kindling? They'd watched the seawater drenching their fields, salting the earth: starvation closing in as inexorably as the cloud of ash from the remains of the volcano at Thera. What had made them believe what they now believed? How had they decided to sink to this?

Those trowel-jockeys in civilized times, they'd count it a gift to be sitting here sweating along with her – plodding on this track through brown fields, toward the Minoans' shrine to a dead god. They'd kill for the chance to understand. Whereas she just wanted to kill the priest riding next to her, for reasons which had nothing to do with the glory of knowledge.

Calchas didn't look capable of it. Put him in a suit, he'd be a bank manager, offering a wide range of cutting-edge financial services with a wise-man's smile. And infuriatingly, he was impeccably polite.

'This satyr of yours,' he said. Probing the edges of her story. 'What was his name again?'

'Adrian. He was quite apologetic about the whole fatherhood thing,

actually.'

She caught him looking past her to Peter again. When the others stared a little too long at Peter's fur, it was with something approaching awe, but Calchas gave him only the regard you would a firmly tethered bear: possibly dangerous, but not especially remarkable by nature. And why not? If your head was in a world where gods were certainties – nothing nebulous, no room for doubt or bewilderment – why would you even remember to be amazed?

'And it wasn't really Adrian's fault, I suppose,' she went on. 'I was a bit out of my head at the time...'

'Well I suppose it's to be expected, if you go drinking with satyrs.'

'Oh, you know what uncouth creatures they are, sir. No great respecters of law or custom.' She leaned in, raised an eyebrow. 'They even allow women to discuss philosophy with them.'

'Heavens.'

'I know. Sometimes they even let us have an insight.'

He gave her a sidelong look, matched her half-smile. 'Satire is not your strongest point,' he said, and returned his eyes to the track. For a moment she wasn't sure whether he'd been making a deliberate pun, just to add insult to injury.

She wouldn't have brought Peter here if time hadn't been so much of the essence. He'd been her shortcut into Minoan high society; a foreign woman travelling alone would hardly rate a mention in the court at Knossos, but one whose life had been touched by the world of gods and monsters at least had curiosity value. Telling her stories had got her not the king's ear, but the ear of one of the palace sculptors – a squinting, hangdog man who had been able to identify the statue she had brought with her. And who had got her a first audience with Calchas, who could tell her the story it carried.

'Iapetus and the Deindum,' he'd said, casting a critical gaze over the workmanship. 'An odd theme, rather obscure. They say Iapetus the Titan encountered a great lizard, a Deindum, who defied the Titans. They fought, until Iapetus changed into a bird, and let the Deindum swallow him whole. Which was his mistake, because then Iapetus ate him from the inside out.'

'Well,' she said. 'Do you know when it was that happened? When were Iapetus and the Deindum walking the earth?' Already she'd been preparing herself for another leap with the time ring, trying to get closer, a stab in the dark across further centuries.

But he'd shifted that exact same appraising gaze onto her. 'Would you like to ask his sister? Rhea might even answer you. If you interest her enough.'

And so they'd joined his retinue, with the other priests returning to the mountains south of Knossos. To the temple below the cave, which

formed a dual shrine: to Rhea, the wily Titan mother, and Zeus, her son who each year died.

And all Peter was seeing on this journey were neat bits of landscape and peasants being peasants – not a starving population who'd lost a whole harvest, trying to hold on until the next one. A palace maintaining its social rhythm, living off diminishing stocks of other peoples' grain. Or the long slow end of Minoan civilization, before a new one moved in.

He couldn't see what was at the far end of the caravan. Truth be told, she'd like to keep it that way. There were times and places to break your children's hearts with the truth, and others where a spiritual awakening could cost far more than it won.

He could do all the growing he wanted once they'd got out of here with what they needed.

'It was Idomeneus himself who brought the tradition back,' said Calchas. 'He was at sea after the waves hit, when the ash was falling... the seas were so rough that he prayed to Poseidon, swore that the moment he reached home he'd sacrifice the first of his creatures he saw. But the first thing he saw upon reaching his estate... was his son running to greet him.' He shrugged.

'So that's it?' The bitter taste was rising in Bernice's mouth. 'You think, God said to Idomeneus, kill me a son? Did you ever think he might not have wanted him to go through with it?'

Calchas blinked, looking faintly baffled. 'It was a solemn oath to a god.'

'Who didn't ask him to promise that...'

'But he still promised. You don't break that sort of thing.'

And true, it was the sort of story where later commentators would tend to include a conveniently placed deer, or a ram in a thicket, just so everyone could save face and go home. 'But afterwards. The plague, the failed crops... Didn't it cross your mind that maybe you might possibly have got the wrong idea?'

His voice got a bit more patient, as if explaining to a child. 'Not at all. You see, that wasn't because he *did* it, it's because he *hesitated*. He didn't want to fulfill his vow, so they started punishing us all. It would have been fine if he'd only been properly zealous about it.' Another casual smile, a hand-wave back at the rear of the convoy. 'So we've been making up for lost time since then.'

It would take less than a second for her to jerk the reins on his horse. Elbow him as it leaped ahead, unseat him. She could be on the ground next to him in seconds, with her back between him and the others, she remembered enough unarmed combat to snap his neck before any of the other priests would even be close enough to see

what happened. History would say the horse bolted and he broke his neck. History would say another high priest stepped right into his place.

Now he had that gentle smile reserved for bleeding hearts. 'Really, I know no one wants to make a sacrifice –'

'– or be one –'

'– but we all have to. I mean, I've offered up my own prize goats, it's not like we're sparing ourselves...'

She made her excuses and dropped back a bit in the caravan, before she choked on her words. How do you tell yourself that one more step down the same road that brought you here, will be the one which turns everything around? That the next little boy you kill, or the next or the next, will be the one that makes the difference?

And how do you decide to start eating people again?

'Of course this isn't Zeus as you know him, thunder and lightning and all that lot – this is an earlier form of his story. He's more of a vegetation god, often worshipped as a youngster. The son of the mother goddess, eventually canonically defined as Rhea, one of the Titans. They still have the story about how when Cronus tried to swallow him, mumsy slipped him a stone in swaddling clothes instead –'

'Mum? Is there going to be a quiz at the end?'

Bernice had been dreading the sarcasm phase pretty much since the moment Peter was born. And right now she just didn't have the reserves for it. 'Now listen. You need to know what to expect, because any or all of these legends could be true. The Titans they worship? They're –'

'Aliens, right? Immortal aliens.'

'No. Immortals have lives. These things aren't immortals... they eat immortals.'

She let that sink in. Honestly, kids today, thinking that 'alien' just meant 'someone from a bit further away than over the next hill'. So comfortable with the idea of people being all the same underneath that they don't actually have any concept of something completely, inutterably not.

'These things are chronophages. Or temporovores, if you prefer Latin. They exist at right angles to our whole space and time, they don't even need bodies unless they want them. They feed off temporal energy – off lives – exactly the way we feed off those.' She waved at the wheat-fields of Knossos. Sickly, malnourished stalks, bowed by the breeze, far as the eye could see.

'They're time-eaters. And tomorrow we're going to walk into the sanctuary of one of them. So if you feel anything godly running up

and down your spine, be very very nice to it. And if any of the idols move? Especially the giant bird ones? Back away slowly as quick as you can.'

Peter was looking serious now. Good.

'But the most important thing you need to know about this Zeus?'

'Yeah?'

'He dies.'

Ahead, against the mountain, she could just make out the temple at Anemospilia. The caves above, sacred site, where the child had been sheltered by Rhea. Another shrine at the peak. The outbuilding huts of the priests and those tending the sacred bulls – the lesser grade of sacrificial victims, warming up in the bullpen in case the star attraction wasn't deemed to be enough. And the stone-walled temple itself: the tomb of a god.

'So they're not invulnerable,' he said. Trying to get ahead of her train of thought.

'It means they can be threatened. They have to act to preserve themselves. And I'm counting on the Deindum being a threat to them too.'

Assuming of course, she thought with an eye to Calchas, that they're not so buggery stubborn as to cling to the wrong choice, just because they already chose it.

The legend that mattered started with Zeus fully grown: the son overthrowing the father, who'd tried to keep him in his belly rather than let him grow into his own man. Freud had a field day with the metaphors, of course, even if he couldn't grasp such a lovely image of uterus envy – but he'd never have imagined that in some brainmelting timeless way the story was straight-up true. That whatever had happened in that insane realm outside time, whatever struggle of primal forces had seemed to us with our ant's-eye view like gods piling mountain on mountain, had bound these creatures to a world which was so not ready to deal with them.

In that real world was Thera: until barely a year before now, the Minoans' brother kingdom among the islands of the Aegean. Plato would have a ball with that one, in his turn – wringing all sorts of meaning out of the legends. He'd repainted Thera under a borrowed name as the height of civilization... a world before the fall, a perfect age under the grace of the Titans, with liberty and justice for all. Until the waves laid them all equally low. But his grand narrative stood beside the other legend: the greedy island, punished by the rising gods of Olympus for their arrogance just as they punished the Titans themselves for their cruelty. Two completely contradictory views of the world as it was, merged to become known as Atlantis. The golden

age and the gilded one, side by side.

Then there were the other legends, gleaned during the time Bernice had defined as her doctoral studies... the ones that filled in the gaps. Those said their wealth of Thera came direct from their mastery over the Titans, imprisoned in the fiery pit of Tartarus. Cronus, father of Zeus, and his fellow gods, used to serve the worldly desires of the Therans.

Until the good citizens finally overreached themselves, and the Titans broke free. And the volcano tore the Aegean Sea apart. Now, tsunamis. Ash and aftershocks. Failed crops, starvation. Whole cities, Akrotiri and Heraklion, more thoroughly erased than Nagasaki.

There are no legends of that next year. History is written by the victors, and nobody won.

‘They must’ve thought it was the end of the world,’ said Peter.

‘Not their mythology. Their world doesn’t end. They just know what happens if you don’t keep the gods happy.’

He was quiet for a moment. Around them the fields were dwindling away to scrubland, dusty ash over exposed rock. At the edge of the tilled land, a leathery farmhand was dumping a bucket of fertilizer among the roots of an olive tree, then moving on to the next, stooping in the sun.

‘Imagine not even having the end of the world to look forward to,’ Peter said.

Mum was quiet for a bit, but she started lecturing again as they got to the edge of the temple precinct. ‘Now the thing about vegetation gods,’ she said, ‘is that they tend to die off. For obvious reasons.’

‘And be reborn, yeah...’

‘Well usually. Like I said, things don’t end. But in this case, the stories are sketchy. The later generations actually tried to suppress them – that’s why the Greeks said “all Cretans are liars”, because they still claimed Zeus died...’

‘So you don’t know,’ he said. ‘You don’t know what’s in the temple.’

‘Pretty much, no.’

He had his zinger ready. ‘Funny, I thought it was just me.’

But Mum was a million miles away. ‘Iapetus ate that Deindum from the inside, they said. Did he wither him? Age him to death from inside? What did they do?’

‘And will they do it for us,’ he added.

‘Well ideally. If they can be trusted,’ said Mum. ‘But there’s only a few of them, across the whole of the universe. And they’re completely undisciplined. Fickle... You know, of course, with great power comes great irresponsibility.’ He smiled. ‘So if we’re going to stop the Deindum... we really need to know for ourselves.’

And then they were through the temple gates, and the sun was smouldering orange just above the horizon. Downhill in the distance, if he squinted – those must be the ruins of Heraklion! The bits the waves had left. Nothing there but stubby walls and piles of stones up to the seashore. The water beyond burned in the sunset, until his eyes ached.

To Peter the ruins were cool, not a tombstone. He didn't seem to grasp that the catastrophe had happened barely a year ago... bloody hell, he was looking at them like an archaeologist.

They ate dinner in the temple courtyard. Bernice refused to attach any emotional significance to the sight of Calchas gnawing meat off the bone, especially since she was doing the same thing.

'Let me know if you see the ghost tonight,' Calchas said casually. 'I think she likes to check out new visitors.'

'There's a ghost?'

'Oh, she's harmless. Some old priestess from centuries ago, she still drops in now and again. Now there's devotion for you...'

She'd kept Peter distracted at the crucial moment, as the priests unloaded the victim and took him to one of the huts. She didn't want him to see the boy's hands were tied. With luck they'd still be out of here before he realized what was going to happen. Who knows – with a bit more luck, once she had what she needed, she might even have a chance to ruin Calchas' day before they left.

'Anyway,' said Calchas. The perfect host. 'I'll take you to meet Rhea late tomorrow. When we do, it's very important that you do exactly as I tell you.'

'All right then – tell me.'

He smiled and shook his head. 'There's a time and a place.' Knowledge is power. If she knew the rituals, the myths, she wouldn't have to rely on him.

Back in the palace, the worry of the sensible moderates had been that the various priests around the island might be conducting human sacrifices without the proper oversight – they wouldn't want them to off an unreasonable number, of course. If what Calchas was doing was some sort of master-of-my-universe powerplay, at least that would make sense of it.

'I don't suppose we could go in after dinner?' she asked gingerly. 'Tonight? Seeing as you'll be rather busy tomorrow, preparing for the ceremony and all...'

'Heavens no,' said Calchas. 'You wouldn't want to meet her when she was unhappy, would you? She'd hardly be likely to give you answers then. Much better to wait 'til after the sacrifice.'

She looked down. 'After, then.' And there went every last scrap of

luck. Maybe she could still keep Peter distracted, long enough that he wouldn't be curious. Like that had ever happened in the past decade or so.

'I take it the... ceremony itself is private? We're not supposed to attend?'

'Well, normally, but seeing as you're an honoured guest...' A thought struck him. 'And afterwards. Would you like me to save you a place at the table?'

The danger for a traveller who takes the low road, is that once your eyes get opened they might not shut again. Suddenly all your first-world problems – a gadget out of batteries, the fuzzy angst of an unfulfilling job – snap right out of focus, in the face of people who have to search for a source of drinking water that's not polluted with dead bodies. When a traveller becomes a time traveller, the danger only multiplies: even sins long since redressed are happening in front of you. It's impossible to put things behind you if there's no behind. Nothing is past, nothing has healed, nothing can be held at a distance. Every child who's ever cried is crying at once.

She turned her eyes to the ruins on the horizon, took long, slow, shallow breaths. Letting the feelings that threatened to burn her up instead heat her slowly: hardening her, honing her. She was here for a purpose, and he wasn't even worth engaging with. When she looked at Calchas again, in all his untroubled certainty, it was with the contempt of thousands of years.

You're history.

Mum left him in their but to unpack while she asked some questions, but there was nothing to unpack. So Peter slipped out to look around. The mountain seemed to be looming over him; on the way in, the mountain range itself had looked like a god's fallen body, with Mount Iuktas as his head.

The boy was in the last but on the left, a priestess waiting outside.

It was the way she glared at him which told him: she wasn't waiting, she was standing guard.

The sacred bulls looked sleek and cared-for. The woman tending them, less so. Adrasteria was dirt-streaked and worn, with a face that put her somewhere between thirty and infinity. She was locking the paddock and heading for home, grateful for Benny's help with the final clearing-up – scraping the ever-present muck off her shoes against the gate. A civilization sinking under a layer of bullshit, Benny thought.

She still partly wanted to know how they did it. What combination of dire warnings and cheap gifts the authorities used to persuade ordinary farmers to accept a power structure that ate their own

people. What bones they threw to the masses.

‘You’ve got kids, right?’

Adrasteria nodded. ‘Two, still.’

Still. She nodded towards the but that held the boy. ‘And what if that were one of yours?’

‘But it’s not. Cause that other kid’s there, it’s not.’

It still seemed so far against their own interests, it didn’t make sense. ‘Do you ever feel... odd about it? Do you look at a priest like Calchas and think, *this man just ate someone’s son?*’

Adrasteria shrugged. She had a flat, workaday voice. ‘I was at Heraklion, when the waves came. A few of us were on the high ground... The storehouses were rubble. The meat, the grain, all washed away. The fishing boats were splinters... The dead were all we had.’

A taste in Bernice’s mouth: salted earth and ashy soil. She almost reached out to put an arm around Adrasteria, but she didn’t look like she wanted a hug. Or much of anything. Today was about getting today’s food together. The catastrophe, and anything better, were ancient history.

She watched Adrasteria leave the temple grounds and head for her farm down the hill, as the last of the daylight faded. Behind her the priests were lighting torches for the night, but to Bernice they looked pathetic against the dark.

Peter grabbed her the moment she walked into the hut. From the look on his face, she knew it was too late.

‘– Mum that other boy, I think he’s a human sacrifice, they’re gonna kill him –’

‘It’s all right,’ she lied, that ultimate Mummy lie. ‘It’s all right, I know.’

‘– so what are we gonna do about...’

She looked at him and took a slow breath, trying to put together a wise mother speech about the laws of time. How half the crowd in Dallas on Kennedy Day were time travellers learning how not to interfere. But before she even finished breathing, he could already see it.

‘...You’re not gonna...?’

And the look he gave his mother made her feel like the biggest horror he’d seen yet.

‘Peter. Peter, listen to me.’ She tried to hold his shoulders but he was already struggling, she had to keep bearing down on him. ‘Peter, we have to be incredibly careful here, if there’s a way then yes but there might not be a –’

‘– He’s going to die! –’

‘– but we’ve got to find out from Rhea and the whole war might be riding on this, millions of lives, and it’s taken us weeks to get this far we can’t ruin this and if we save one more that’s a bonus, not a –’

He almost screamed, a wordless cry, to stop the flood of reasons. ‘We’ve got to do something!’

‘That’s what they’re thinking.’ She knelt in front of him, trying to lock eyes. ‘With the sacrifices. They’re hellbent on doing something when they can’t actually fix it and it’s just making it worse. A lot of somethings are wrong.’ He kept twisting away from her gaze, but she had to get through to him. ‘We are in a very deep dark hole. If we shout it’ll cave in on us. Try to climb and the walls will crumble. Sometimes doing nothing is the only thing you can do.’

She’d never told him about being trapped like that on Beta Ischiasis. Hadn’t wanted to scare him. You’ve been trying to keep him from taking things too seriously, and now you have to convince him how serious being careful is.

He was backing away, staring downward, hands balled into fists, pressed to his forehead. ‘You knew all along...’

She nodded.

‘You should have told me!’

‘I didn’t want you to have to see this.’ She reached out, awkwardly. ‘I’m sorry, I should never have brought you here –’

‘But it’s still here! You just don’t want me to know!’ He twisted away again, realizing. ‘What else is there? Come on!’

Too late now. If she didn’t tell him he’d know she was holding back. So, quiet, as measured as she could make it. ‘In the ceremony, they’re going to drink his blood, and eat his flesh.’

A choking sound came from his throat. ‘They eat people...’

‘Only the priests, only in rituals like that. You don’t have to worry, you’re safe –’

‘Shut up!’ He shoved her away, hard. ‘Liar.’

And here she thought she’d been keeping him safe in the dark... She felt like she’d swallowed a stone.

She kept trying to reach out to him as they got ready for bed. ‘Peter, if we can think of a plan, we can still save him, if we don’t risk the mission. I need you to help me here.’

But he wanted nothing to do with her, he stayed curled up on his bedding in the corner. Clenched in a ball even lying down, until the effort of maintaining it exhausted him and he sank into sleep.

She woke in darkness, feeling the breeze. Groped for her covers, found nothing. Then jolted awake as she touched the cool hand reaching for her.

A statue, hanging over her in the moonlight. Sculpted woman,

hovering in midair, its form dressed in the tattered remains of robes. Cold eyes, real hair, straight fixed arms reaching out for her.

‘Peter...’

The statue met her eyes. *Shh.*

She said nothing as the woman descended – hovering prone above her, close enough to whisper. ‘Rhea, I presume?’ she murmured.

Was that a curl to those hard lips? *No. The Titans made me, but I’m not their creature.*

‘Well. Erm. Can I help you?’

Her mouth never moved. *I doubt it.*

Gently, relentlessly, her arms snaked around Bernice. Close enough now to feel breath that wasn’t there, a cold cheek touching hers. Pressing her whole length against her, sinewy legs hooking around hers, pinning them in place. The hard bearing of a statue, but the softness of skin against her chest.

– Really. I like to think I’m an open-minded girl, but I have to tell you I’m seriously not in the mood –’

Be quiet. I want to talk to you.

And her bed fell away beneath her and the room wheeled around, and she was clinging to this woman who was flying her headfirst toward the wall, oh the *window*, and by the time she was calling out for Peter they were already outside – racing over the tracked mud with a wind shivering her shoulders. She twisted her neck, saw the ground plummeting downwards, and clung to this woman like her only source of warmth.

‘Excuse me, miss, er, I’m sorry you haven’t told me your name, but if you just want a quiet word I’m sure we could have one down –’

What do you want with the Titans?

‘Well, not much really, I just wanted to tell them something –’

What. Do you want. With the Titans?

‘I want to end a war!’

The woman slowed. Raised her head off of Bernice’s shoulder, meeting her eyes from inches away: a bleak, stony look.

It does not end.

And she took off again, straight up. Bernice’s stomach lurched, she quickly looked away from the disappearing ground – but looking up was no better; this woman was the only thing between her and falling into the stars.

‘Look, I’m from what you’d call the future, the far future, things have changed by then – the Titans aren’t worshipped any more, people don’t even believe they’re real, I mean they even did a film called Clash of the Titans with no actual Titans in it at all, sorry I’m rambling but really everything’s changed –’

This is the future. I was born more than five hundred years ago, I was a

priestess of Cronus on Thera. I've seen how things change.

'You were...? Oh my Goddess, I'm so sorry, about everyone in Akrotiri and...'

I know it does not end. And I know how the people forget. You say the Titans are forgotten in your time?

'Yes, pretty much, people think they're fantasies –'

Then how did you know they were real to come back here?

'Ah.'

Unexpectedly, that mouth curled slightly into a smile. *Yes. Ah.*

She could feel muscles straining in the woman's legs, hooked around her own; this wasn't some effortless ghost, she was fighting for this. Wound so tight she might as well be stone. She shifted her grip on the woman, locking her hands around her hips: clutching tight, her only source of warmth in the night air.

'I... I track down legends, I look for the truth. It's sort of my job. And I found out... There's a war coming. A new race who want to be gods. The Deindum. And the Titans have fought them before...'

Again that face before her barely moved, but her scowl was huge. *And you think the Titans would care? You think they would ever care?*

'About themselves, yes. If these things threaten them as well, we can –'

Her head shook slowly. There was just enough moonlight to make out her wild, damaged eyes. *Everyone wants something from the Titans. You think they're dead and gone, and you still want them!*

'Well what about you? Looks like you hate them – why are you even here, then?'

Calchas. She almost spat the name. *I threaten, I plead, I reason, I take him up at night and whisper to him in his sleep. Nothing changes him.*

'...You want to stop the sacrifices?'

The woman was staring right through her now – a wild worn-out look Bernice knew from the inside. *It does not end. It does not end. And if you bring the Titans to your people it will start all over again.*

Then her grip slackened against Bernice's back, and Bernice forgot to breathe. Pure reflex – her nails dug into the woman's back. The woman lowered her head, looking past her to the ground. Bernice could feel her breath in her ear now, hear the thought as she formed it. *If I let you go, right now, perhaps that at least ends...*

Bernice tightened up, pulling the woman closer. 'I don't think you will,' she said, as levelly as she could manage.

Why not?

'Because if you were the type to kill anyone... it would have been Calchas.'

A sigh, an acceptance. Gently the woman's hand moved back where it was. *And then how many others after him?*

‘Yes. Quite.’

Calchas thinks I’m a demon. He won’t listen.

‘Well I’m more than happy to. Really, we can talk this over. Come back to our room, I’ll pour you a drink, we can talk about it on the nice solid ground. I like the ground, did I mention that? Always digging in it. And then maybe you could you stop doing that italic-y thing in my head? It tickles.’

No. I can’t stop. I’m sorry, there’s no other way.

‘Well, that’s my problem too, isn’t it...’

But the woman pulled back to meet her gaze again, and there were new damp hollows in her eyes. *Don’t you see? I’ve lost the words. Too long alone.*

Bernice swallowed. ‘You said the Titans did this to you?’

What we didn’t do ourselves. She felt the woman bank sharply, taking in the darkened landscape below – not that she was going to look to check. *They’ve ruined the land. Through them we’ve ruined our souls.*

So much to say, but the words were sticking – compassion and determination and grief all gumming up her throat. But what finally made it out, to her own surprise, was a bit of a chuckle.

What? What’s funny?

‘I’m flying, three thousand feet in the air over ancient Crete, clinging desperately to the arse of some sort of demigoddess... I can think of a surprising number of people who’d be quite happy to change places with me.’

And slowly she felt the woman begin to quiver with a laugh as well, and in that moment she felt like things might just be all right after all.

Peter woke fuzzily in the dark, worn out from not crying: an unfocused heap until he remembered why he’d got that way.

Mum was nowhere in sight. He lay there, breathing hard, thoughts whirling in tight circles. Always spinning back to the same point but pushing a bit farther along each time.

This might be the only chance.

The impulse kept rising but he knew he wasn’t, he couldn’t, it was too big an effort even to get out of bed. Until suddenly he moved and it was easy, he was already out of bed before he knew it, and if he was moving he must be about to do it after all.

Quietly he padded towards the door.

Her name was Alcestis. Five hundred years ago she’d served the Titans as a priestess on Thera. The lives the gods gorged on were kept secret then, from a people who hadn’t yet been convinced to embrace the price. The blood on her hands carefully hidden from her. When she found out, she’d gone mad, attacked the Titans, attacked her people, rebelled, repented and tried to kill them all. Not necessarily in that

order.

Her story was gappy, contradictory, like a fragmentary manuscript. She stumbled through it, unfamiliar with telling it to anyone in all that time. Now she sat with Bernice on the side of the mountain, just below the cave she didn't dare enter – looking down on the darkened temple below, and whispering her story into her mind.

In the process of whatever-she'd-done, she'd entered the Titans' realm, been transformed. Perhaps she had escaped, perhaps not; it could be she only still existed in this form as an echo of their powers. Maybe a sane, repentant Alcestis had gone on to live and die in the best way she could, leaving only this half-real ghost to go on. Or maybe the priestess and the ghost were one and the same: hardened over time into something one step away from human. Bernice couldn't tell. All she knew was, this woman had seen the centuries, seen the ash fall, and even after all this could still tell right from wrong.

The truth came out five hundred years ago, she murmured voicelessly. The people renounced the Titans' gifts, the price for them... and then, after a while, they forgot. All they remembered were legends of a golden age, when all their bellies were full. And they forgot where it had led them.

'So they opened up Tartarus again, and... well, bang.'

I tried to stop them, I tried so hard... Alcestis' arms tightened round her own knees: willing herself back under control. I knew it would happen, and I still tried to stop it.

'Of course you did.' Bernice inched closer to her on the ledge, looking down with her at the pinpricks of torchlight which marked the temple below. Tiny dots of fire at the bottom of an ocean of dark.

Whatever gift you think you'll get from the Titans... Don't. Don't bring them back to your people.

'Oh Goddess no, I don't want them anywhere near my people, we so couldn't handle them. I just want to point them towards our common enemies and let them go play...'

And Alcestis turned towards her, silent, anguished. *That's what we did.*

'...Oh.'

Our war with Athens. A hundred thousand souls... She reached out and clasped Bernice's hand, fervently. Don't do it. For your enemies' sake.

And Bernice looked out into the dark again: seeing the night below as if it had fallen across the land like ash. The Titans had done this. A land as cold and inhospitable below as in the spaces between the stars. The only points of light near the sacrificial fire.

How could she?

She swallowed, hard. 'I need another way.'

I wish I had one.

And suddenly it was all bubbling up, all her impotent anger,

pathetic in its peevishness. 'Of course you do. What do you even do here? Calchas said you were bloody harmless. I bet you can't even save that little boy.'

I do. Don't you see? I keep doing it. It does not end.

'Come on, you're telling me you stop all their sacrifices and –'

She gave her another one of those old looks, which left Bernice shamefaced. It wasn't fair for ghosts to look haunted. *This isn't the only temple. This happens across the island... I can only be in one place at a time.*

Head in her hands. 'Yeah. So which do you choose.'

I save who I can... out in the villages, some of the priests take me for Rhea herself. I appear at the sacrifice, carry the child from the altar. Hide him with orphans on the other side of the island. The priests don't ask questions... they're really not very bright.

'Oh, I don't know, even I'd be pretty convinced...'

Suddenly there was a smile peeking through for a moment. *I was in the priesthood – they didn't pick us for our brilliance.*

'Ah. Fair enough.'

But Calchas sees Rhea himself. So he's too sure to believe.

'That figures.' She might bring hope to the hopeless, Bernice thought, but not to the ones who didn't see any reason to hope for anything better.

And this is the most dangerous place I could be. If Rhea ever notices me... she'll unmake me.

'But you still come here,' said Bernice gently. 'You have to. I know how that is.' For a moment she wondered if Alcestis had ever had children of her own. She started to reach out to her, but somehow even after the way they'd been tangled up before, she didn't dare touch her now.

And from somewhere she began to summon a new idea.

'If I save the boy for you tomorrow... will you get me into the sanctuary tonight?'

You weren't going to save him anyway? said Alcestis.

Bernice's mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. 'I couldn't see how. But now I can. If I don't need Calchas' help to talk to Rhea, we can do it all and be gone before the ceremony...'

Suddenly the voice in her head was cool and hard as marble. *What are you asking me to be part of?*

'You can't be seen to interfere, right? I'll be your scapegoat. I'll be your sacrificial lamb. I'll take all the blame and go off in the wilderness, I've got no life here to lose anyway. Just please, help me talk to the Titans.'

No, Bernice. I won't let you make the same mistake we did.

'Oh, I've got a different mistake in mind now. I won't try to enlist

them in the army, but I still need an answer...' And it was her turn to grasp Alcestis by the shoulder, trying to reach her. 'These things in my time, the Deindum, threaten everything. You, us, the Titans, every living creature up there in the sky, every creature that's ever lived or died. It's a whole new order for the universe. And the Titans are the only people I've ever heard of killing one of them. Even if I don't bring them into the war... I still have to know.'

For a long moment Alcestis said nothing. Bernice just watched her, watched her breathing.

Did you mean that, about the drink in your room?

'...Yes. Well, mostly. Also I was bloody terrified, I was just talking. But yes. And Alcestis was twisting her fingers awkwardly in her lap. *It's been too long, I wasn't sure what a real kindness sounded like. I believe you.*

Finally she stood, extending her hand.

Let me take you down.

Bernice finally let go of her own breath. 'Thank you. But this time? I get to ride on top.'

There was a different priest on guard. But he was facing the door of the hut, not the outside, because he was watching for the victim trying to break out. And with just the torchlight around the door, Peter could get right up to him without being seen.

Peter peeped round the corner of the hut, tightening his muscles, nerving himself for the sprint. The guard was about a foot and a half taller than him, but that was still good, yeah, 'cause he'd never expect a kid to do this. They didn't know how strong a Killoran was, even a little one.

Be fast, be angry, be quiet as you can.

'When they dug up Akrotiri... They didn't find any bodies. It had been evacuated. Was that you?'

I did what I could.

Alcestis touched down around the side of the temple, Bernice clinging to her back. However she flew, Bernice thought, the movements were more like tai chi than birds' wings. Riding the winds of time, Alcestis had called it, and Bernice didn't really want to know what she'd had to give up to gain that Titan skill.

This is as close as I can go. If Rhea catches me... they'll swallow me up again.

Two priests standing guard out front; Calchas was taking no chances with the inner sanctum while his honoured guests were around. 'Right,' Bernice whispered. 'You go talk theology with the guards, and I'll nip inside.'

An awkward pause; she could see Alcestis groping past her first

hardened reaction, through words and feelings she was no longer used to.

Good luck. I hope you get your answers... and nothing more than you want.

‘Wait.’ She caught Alcestis as she was turning to go. ‘Before you... The best thing I can tell you is... This moment is as bad as it gets.’ She snorted. The words sounded ashy even to her. ‘Yeah, I know, so comforting when you’re in the middle of it. But really, this is as far as it goes. And in the end... they stop. The sacrifices end. Already by the time the stories are written, people have learned to be appalled by the whole idea. They try to suppress the truth – but it still comes out... because they dig up the ruins of this place. Destroyed by an earthquake during a sacrifice.’ She was fumbling her own way through the words, but she had to give her this. She had to. ‘And in thousands of years, your people are still here. And they can still be still cruel and cowardly and shortsighted and selfish and all that, but they’re that much better than their worst.’

She worked up the nerve to touch Alcestis’ cheek. ‘It ends.’

And suddenly she could feel her breathing hard: muscles contorting under the skin, tightening round the eyes to keep from crying. A statue cracking. Slowly she exhaled, and Bernice could see the relief loosening her body. Her eyes never wavered, she never crumpled or looked away, but when she lowered her head she was moving like a human woman again.

Thank you.

‘My pleasure...’

Alcestis turned and stepped into the air. *Now make sure it stays ended.*

The guard was shouting for help but he was still holding on, he’d knocked the guy down with his first jump and now they were scrabbling in the dirt like dogs. And he tried hitting him but a punch wasn’t enough to make him stop, so he had to keep banging him against the wall over and over again till finally he wasn’t fighting so hard, and when he let go the guard slumped in a heap, bleeding from the cuts on his forehead and he looked horrible and he was gonna kill that kid.

Peter yanked the door open and saw the boy huddled in the corner, bunched up with terrified eyes.

‘Come on. Let’s go.’

Bernice stayed hidden until she heard the squawk of one priest being lifted off his feet, and the shouting of the other as he followed from beneath. After that it was only a matter of a few seconds to get in through the temple doors.

No light at all in here. Fortunately she'd glimpsed the Deindum statue before she'd closed the door; Calchas had placed it carefully on the nearest altar. She inched her way over in the dark. Ahead was the sepulchre, supposed to contain the bones of Zeus. A moment's urge to open it, perhaps pinch a little something for the archaeologists of her time; but no, not if it would annoy the Titans. Perhaps best to leave this a Schroedinger's God.

Carefully she removed her time ring, did that indescribable something in her head to activate it, then placed it on the Deindum statue. That should do it: a beacon to attract the local Titan's attention, and an offering to them, a sculpture thousands of years older than it should be. She kneeled in front of the altar as Alcestis had warned her to, and assumed the ritual submissive posture: head down, arms folded across her chest. Then she just waited for something to hit her God Spot.

She never felt it. She didn't even feel like there was anyone else in the room. It was only when she realized she could see, even though there was still no light, that she knew that Rhea was already inside her head.

And when she dared to look up just a bit, she could see the statue on the altar dissolving gently into sand.

They'd almost made it to the scrubland when the other priests caught up. Whole bunch of them with torches and swords, shouting noise he couldn't understand. The boy had stopped, he was looking back in despair, he'd already given up. But just a little bit away from their torches and they'd be back in the dark. And then the grass and the mountain and the caves, you could hide a kid in these caves. If you could get there.

His heart was still pounding from the run. He took a step forward, putting himself between the men and the boy. Baring his teeth, stretching his face in a whole new way. What would biting a cannibal taste like? They deserved it, they deserved whatever they got. And they'd probably want to kill him tomorrow instead but Mum would get him out, she always did, and now he'd saved someone she hadn't.

'Run!'

Now she could see. Retina-burn something filling her field of view, hovering and shifting. Her brain said bird because it was better than saying aaaaugh.

But Rhea wasn't out there, Bernice could look right at it and not feel a presence attached – more like an after-image, a glowing shadow. If its being was anywhere in this space it wasn't around her, it must be in her but she couldn't feel it there either, just her own racing thoughts over and over. The Titans the plan the Deindum the need for

an answer the Titans the Deindum her home under threat the coalition the galactic coordinates rendezvous point where they should meet, oh shit oh shit that was where Rhea was, tracing through her mind in some four-dimensional way, brushing against neurons and firing them off. Fingernails across her grey matter. Tiny electrical fingers sliding through her brain and *she couldn't even feel them*, no idea where they were now, just a hint of where they'd been before from the thoughts once they finally bubbled up to the surface –

She swallowed hard, throat dry, and retrieved her time ring from the statue. The stone had gone shapeless, but she held its shape in her mind.

Concentrate. Deindum. Iapetus. I know what you are, I've met your kind before, say hullo to Artemis for me, and you know this lot and we really could use some answers about how we can –

– make an alliance and no not an alliance don't put words in my mouth, my mouth is out there somewhere and you're –

The spasm hit every inch of her at once. Falling face-first hitting the floor, crumpling inside as her body throbbed, clutching her knees clenching her thighs, tiny in the face of this vast ringing chord of glory glowing all around –

Rhea had hit her God Spot after all. Fingerpoke right in the hindbrain, just to remind her what she was dealing with. The bigoddess just wasn't playing fair.

Now the visions were getting more intense, blurs and whorls of colour, but still she couldn't feel anything bringing it on. The intangible hand. Full of emptiness, darkness closing in.

She didn't want them unleashed. She didn't want a massacre. It wasn't about what she wanted, oh goddess she knew that now. What did they want? Nothing was coming to mind, from inside or out. Just the feeding, and the sacrifices –

– and the memories in her head weren't the same as before. The wheatfield again, but as if it stretched to the horizon: stunted stalks, barely hanging on, hardly enough to fill a belly. Every child in the land crying at once. The urge, the affliction, calling you to carry your whole world's problems on your back, when you'd snap under the weight. You'd have to be an angel. An angel made of stone.

But even wider now – the wheatfield across worlds, across times, all present at once behind your eyes: the wider your world the more that was brought to you. All the ills of a continent, a planet, a galaxy, all crowding for your attention. No wonder the Titans kept their distance. Grazing imperceptibly, like the sacred bulls in their paddock.

But the sacrifices – the harvest, the offering to them –

And she could feel the sheaf on the altar, already withered and dead, nourishing as ash. Oh no. Those idiots with their knives, taking

lives for their gods. But how could the Titans feed on a life that was already gone?

It all piled up in her head, faster and faster. She tried to look away but past the godglow everything was dark, all around. All these children sacrificed to a historical footnote, a god who wasn't even remembered as having been about death. Whose whole meaning had been not just forgotten but *reversed*. And the source of those legends feeling nothing – just a faint disdain that these tiny creatures couldn't even get that right. She wanted to vomit, to laugh, to scream, to grab Calchas by the throat and shake him. *Human sacrifice – you're doing it wrong!*

She crumpled, reaching for anything to cling to. There had to be something good to come out of this. There had to be something. Just one answer, one thing to learn, one lesson that could save her generation. You know how to stop these horrors – please just tell me just tell me just tell me –

But now there were hands grabbing roughly at her shoulder, and the haze fluttering away from her eyes.

'No, no, not now –'

Reaching for it, gasping, trying to hold onto the blur and not the arms yanking her from the floor, not the head slowly coming into focus in the new torchlight. Calchas glaring at her, with blood on his face, and a sword at her throat.

'You put your boy up to this, didn't you.'

And behind him three priests, bloody and battered, holding a thrashing sack that yelled like Peter. A fourth behind them, at a safe distance, prodding her son with a spear.

'No,' she stumbled, 'please, no, what have you –'

Calchas dragged her – elbow round her neck – to the others, shouting all the way. 'You utter –' Words failing him. '– Idiot! How could you do this? Selfish...' Simply furious. 'Do you want to get us all killed?'

He was glaring at her: righteous, vicious, terrified.

'Oh, you're dead,' she managed. 'You're so dead.'

And then the priests were dragging them both away, and she was shouting back at Calchas as the temple door into the night – 'She doesn't even get the sacrifice! Don't you understand? You're only feeding yourself!' But he was gone in the dark.

Peter was still howling like a wild thing as the priests bundled them into the hut, the condemned cell where the little boy had been kept. He was howling even as she tried to grab hold of him. 'I saved him. I saved him when you wouldn't –'

'I'd just found a way to do it and you ruined it! You ruined

everything!’

And there was nothing else to do here, the moment was gone and might as well be thousands of years ago. Once inside she didn’t even wait to get him out of the sack, all she did was throw her arms around this struggling lump and reach for the time ring –

And thousands of years later, on the other side of the stars, it was daylight.

They were kneeling in the gardens at the Collection, just outside Bernice’s rooms. Cool crisp air, an early springtime morning. Around them the cherry-blossoms were beginning to settle, covering the lawn like a dusting of snow.

They held on to each other for a long while, until they felt ready to move. Sorries flowing back and forth between them. Breathing, letting five minutes ago become four thousand years ago. A horror that had long since been laid to rest. Her mind was slowly widening again, re-filling with the problems of the present, and those yet to come.

And this is why I don’t time travel all that much, thought Bernice.

Peter had been clubbed but not stabbed; they’d wanted him in one piece. The spear-jabs had left only small nicks and cuts, but she should get him to a doctor right away anyway. She tried lifting him – it was hard these days – but he’d rather walk than be carried.

Before he could say anything she told him he wasn’t wrong. She could still feel that look he’d given her, when he’d first found out: that sheer outrage that the universe could allow something so ugly to happen. And so he’d fought against it. That simple. If he could keep hold of that he’d be better than she ever was. If she could teach him to think first he might even do it without lots of senseless violence along the way. Or without losing the war.

‘We still saved him,’ he said.

‘You’re sure about that?’ she asked gently. ‘They didn’t just catch him the next morning? Or when he tried to steal food from the nearest village? They didn’t drag him back?’

Firmly. ‘He got away.’

She met Peter’s eyes, took a deep breath. ‘Then some other little boy died instead.’

He slowed to a halt, his face contorting, and she made her words as gentle as she could. ‘They would never cancel the ceremony. Maybe they delayed it a day while they found someone else. But there’s always someone else they could use...’

She could see that spark dying in his eyes even as she spoke. Before she knew it she was hugging him, trying to squeeze it back into life. ‘And I’m just so glad it wasn’t you.’

‘We could go back,’ he said thickly, right in her ear. Half clinging to

her, half pushing her away. 'Do it right. Stop them all. History won't care.'

And now she was supposed to give that wise mother's speech about the laws of time. But she didn't believe a word of it. She knew what she believed.

'You know what? You can. Any time you like. You can go back when you're eighteen, or eighty, or any time you want – the big problems will still be there. You know that. You want to save the next boy, and the next, and the next? You want to spend the rest of your life right there, saving that one little corner of the world? You can.'

'But you've only got so many days in your life, and you've got to pick which battles you're going to fight in them. Only so many worlds you can save in a lifetime. Which ones are you going to choose?'

She didn't expect an answer, but she could see him coming to one regardless. And not wanting to. 'But it feels selfish. Picking ours over theirs.'

She shook her head. 'It's just about working out where you can do the most. And maybe finding one thing you can end.'

Together they limped their way into the house. Two more refugees from disaster, on a tiny world overflowing with them. 'Still glad I did it,' he said. 'I couldn't not do it, even if it was just for me.'

And she hugged him as they walked, rubbing his furry hair in that way he had already grown up too much for. 'Selfish, huh.'

'So did the Titans listen?' Peter asked later.

'I don't know. We were a bit interrupted you know...'

She felt Peter flinch – 'I'm sorry, Mum' – and raised an apologetic hand. But she wasn't sure which of them had made the first mistake. He'd remembered something she'd been trying her hardest to forget. Perhaps she'd kept Peter hidden away in the dark long enough.

'Anyway. They know where to find us, and what's at stake. They might take our side whether we like it or not.'

It still felt foul in her own mouth. She hadn't got the answer she'd wanted, maybe not even the aid Alcestris feared. She hadn't punctured Calchas with a pithy exit line – oh bloody hell, what she should have said was 'All Cretans are liars', but he wouldn't even get it. She hadn't even got Alcestris that drink.

Still, Titans willing, it might turn out to be enough. In the end, they had been there, and they had come back, and it was up to them how they were changed by it.

It wasn't the same boy, or the same day. And it was just an earthquake, not the wrath of the Titans, not the end of the world.

But the earth shook enough to drive the priests and priestesses out of the temple. Calchas was among the last – hastily carving flesh,

swilling blood, desperate to finish the ritual in time to appease the gods' latest burst of bad temper. If he could just do this, everything would be all right again.

It was only when he looked up that he saw the temple was ablaze. Fallen torches, rocking roof, stones working loose all around.

Maybe he understood. Maybe he didn't, and died confused and terrified rather than humbled. Either way, he bolted for the way out.

The ghost was waiting in the doorway. Arms out, blocking the escape, fierce quiet glare. A statue in tatters.

Alcestis stood and met his eyes – old and stiff and proud and certain. Knowing that these bodies alone would be found, and remembered in times to come. The only ones out of all of them to make a difference.

Her faint smile, a tiny triumph.

It ends.

Epilogue

Eddie Robson

Lianna Martin awoke, put away the bed in her office, poured herself a glass of water and sat by the window. She'd have preferred coffee but the Deindum didn't supply it. She had requested some from them, only to be told that it was not only unnecessary to sustain her but actively unhealthy. Momentarily she felt like she was being lectured on a health farm, like the one she'd been to as a teenager. She joked to herself that this wasn't as bad as that because at least here they didn't make her go for five mile runs every morning.

Sometimes Lianna laughed at her own jokes, but not that one.

Lianna sat by the window and looked out at the city. The place could hardly have been better suited to the Deindum's needs. It had been one of the first places they'd seized, and as Lianna had just been attempting to leave it at the time of the attack, she had been here longer than most. She'd been more than ready to see the back of it – it was an ugly town and ugly things had happened here, even before the invasion. She'd been overseeing the sale of the planet to Irving Braxiatel, and he'd just used some alarming strong-arm tactics to clear the place of all residents. So when the Deindum took it over, they found a city full of empty buildings. Their mothership had landed in the middle of the settlement, crushing half of a leisure centre in the process: they then demolished City Hall and recycled the rubble into their base of operations, with the mothership housed at the centre.

The people they'd captured in the process of taking Maximizediras were assigned rooms in the empty buildings – many of them in the same rooms they thought they'd just left behind for good. Lianna elected to stay at the IMC office she'd used for her business here, sleeping on a folding bed.

And more people arrived, and were housed here, and Lianna realised Maximizediras had become the Deindum's prisoner-of-war camp. As the planet's surface was mostly water, there was no escape from the city swimming to the next nearest land mass was impossible unless you were amphibious, and even if you did all the other land masses were tiny and the Deindum were presumably watching them. There was nowhere to hide here.

Braxiatel had got away, of course. The Deindum had tried to keep that quiet as much as they could, maintaining that escape was impossible. Yet in many ways the stories of Braxiatel's escape, whispered through the city in myriad incompatible versions, only

aided their cause. It remained true that escape was virtually impossible, and nobody knew for sure how Braxiatel had done it; as a result, the prisoners were kept occupied in a fruitless quest for this semi-mythical way out. If they had had no hope of escape, they might have decided they had nothing to lose, and that might have been a problem for the Deindum. As it was, hope was a part of their prison.

The existing buildings had filled up, so the Deindum had started to build more in every available space. The concentration of people was becoming intolerable. More tolerable than being executed, though.

Lianna was just wondering if she might be able to buy some coffee on the black market when she saw a ship land on the spot where the leisure centre once stood. She recognised it. It was bringing more prisoners.

She wondered where they were all going to go.

Hass stood in the queue behind Cordel. They were near the back – neither of them had been in any hurry to get off the ship, and had let the others scramble and jostle towards the exit.

Cordel turned to Hass. ‘Do you know anyone who’s been taken prisoner?’

‘I think so,’ Hass replied.

‘You can apply to be billeted with them if you want to. Apparently the camp’s pretty full, people living on top of each other. Maybe they think there’ll be fewer incidents if they can avoid making strangers share a room.’ Cordel smiled. ‘If your friend’s not here, I’ll share with you. You seem like an easy-going bloke.’

Hass bowed his head. ‘Thank you. I like to think so.’

The queue shuffled forwards. A Deindum android sent Hass and Cordel to separate processing booths. There, Hass was greeted by a Deindum and another android. The greeting took the form of a vicious ‘Stop! No movement!’ from the Deindum.

That was all they said. They didn’t ask any questions about who he was. They seemed to have all that information already. Tiny devices buzzed around him, probing and scanning him for their records. The Deindum’s eyes seemed to be fixed on him. Hass wasn’t sure whether they always looked like this or whether there was a problem, but he certainly felt the creature was displeased to see him.

The Deindum barked an order at the android and the android brought up images Hass recognised: his home planet of Yesod, and Kaparr 72, the Galactic Chair who had averted the Bubble Crisis and therefore probably the best-known Yesodi in history. She seemed to be the Deindum’s standard example of the species, the picture which appeared next to ‘Yesodi’ in their encyclopaedia.

The Deindum looked from the images to Hass and back again

several times. The external senses on his encounter suit told him that Cordel had been processed and was moving off already. Hass was taking longer. Hass was causing trouble, just by being here. Hass did not like this turn of events.

How much did the Deindum know about the Yesodi? What was their scanning equipment telling them about him right now? Did they know what would happen if he didn't discharge his radiation emissions regularly, if he allowed them to build up? Did they know whether it would even affect them if he did?

And if they did know these things, what would they do with Hass?

The Deindum seemed to be waiting for something – orders, or more information – and Hass tried to calm himself. If they knew, wouldn't they have just ignored his surrender and destroyed his ship when they found him, letting his remains drift harmlessly into space? They wouldn't have brought him here. Surely.

They were from the future, of course. So they might already know the outcome of Hass' actions here. Perhaps it didn't matter to them what he did. Perhaps he was utterly unimportant.

The Deindum received a response, ordered the android to put a tag on Hass and brusquely asked Hass if there was anybody he knew in the camp.

Lianna returned from a unsuccessful trip to the docks, hoping to find someone who'd sell her some coffee, to find her door ajar. She didn't give this much thought – privacy and security were now meaningless here. Her few belongings were probably being ransacked by a guard, and she was glad she hadn't been able to get any coffee as it would only have been taken off her.

There was more to this train of thought, but it was derailed when she entered the office and saw Hass sitting behind her desk.

'Hello, Ms Martin,' he said. She wasn't altogether sure of how to read his voice, but he sounded tired. She sort of wanted to go and hug him, but his encounter suit made it seem like a pointless gesture, somehow.

'Oh no,' she said, closing the door behind her. 'They got you?'

'Yes.'

'It's good to see you're alive, though.'

'Likewise. The early reports from Maximediras were alarming. We've heard very little since then. Nobody has come near enough to find out.'

'We've heard nothing at all since the last lot of prisoners arrived, about three weeks back,' Lianna said. 'Well, there's the odd tid-bit – people have rigged up pirate receivers and tried to pull stuff off the net, but it's not easy. There's a blackout and if they find you breaking

it, it's not pleasant. But it's impossible to get a picture of what's going on. If we find out anything, I always wonder if we're being fed it by them.' She leaned in slightly. 'We're desperate to know more.'

Hass didn't respond to the prompt. His faceplate shifted away from her: he seemed to be staring at the desk.

'So?' Lianna said.

Hass wondered what the right thing to do was. Was it wrong to give people hope? Was it helpful? What should he tell her?

He looked at her, decided what sort of person she was, and spoke. 'We are losing.'

He immediately saw that he hadn't made a mistake in saying this. It was what she'd expected. If he had lied she would have known, though she may not have said anything, leaving them both to pretend to each other like children.

'Braxiatel's coalition has been attacked from the inside,' he continued, recounting what Cordel had told him. 'The Deindum are disrupting its coherence, hampering their ability to make a unified and effective response. Supply chains have been blocked. Segments of the coalition are being isolated and picked off. At least two of the coalition's largest members are thought to be ready to surrender. It's very possible that they already have.'

Lianna leaned back. 'So is this it, then? It is, isn't it?'

'I have not given up entirely,' Hass added. 'I have friends who may be able to do something. Not just Braxiatel. I do know some remarkable people.'

Lianna sighed. 'But how many? How many remarkable people do you think you need to beat this lot?'

'The actions of one person can make a difference. I should know. It was my own action that caused all this.'

Lianna's eyes narrowed. 'Seriously? How?'

Hass waved a hand. 'Braxiatel sent me on a mission and failed to give me the full details of what I was doing. It is his fault. But it still weighs on my conscience. I could have done nothing, and none of this would have happened. Which is why I came back here.'

'But that's daft, Hass. You think you deserve to suffer for what you did, is that it?'

'That isn't what I meant, though it may be true. I came here to do something.'

Lianna raised her eyebrows. 'What? To set us all free? Because I know Braxiatel got out, but I can't see you getting all these people -'

'How many people?'

Lianna shrugged. 'I'm not very good with estimating numbers. And they keep building more blocks to keep us in. Hundreds of thousands.'

Five hundred thousand?’

Inside his suit, Hass closed his eyes. It was a lot, but by comparison to those threatened by this war? He’d have to weigh this very carefully. If only he was in touch with Bernice, or Bev, or Doggles. He wanted more information. Did they have a plan, any of them? Were they still alive?

‘What did you come to do?’ asked Lianna.

‘I can’t tell you,’ said Hass. ‘But I will do it if I must.’

Fighting in the dark. Blindly hoping to make a difference.

This was what happened in war.

About the Authors

Jason Arnopp is a scriptwriter and novelist. He wrote the 2005 novel *Friday The 13th: Hate-Kill Repeat* and Big Finish short stories including *Prime Five* for 2007's *Bernice Summerfield: Missing Adventures*. He contributed *The Demons Of Red Lodge* to Big Finish's forthcoming audio-play collection *The Demons Of Red Lodge & Other Stories*, as well as the Fifth Doctor story *The Lions Of Trafalgar* for the new Short Trips audio range. He wrote the short film *Ghost Writer* and worked on forthcoming web drama series *Tempting Fates*. He can be reached at jasonarnopp.com and on Twitter, where he regularly quacks away like some demented puffin.

Jonathan Blum has been writing for Benny since 1996; he wrote for the *New Adventures* and BBC Books novel range with his wife Kate Orman. Their novella *Fallen Gods* won the Aurealis Award for Best Australian SF Novel; *The End Times* is a sort-of-sequel to it. Recently he's been writing for DWM and SFX, doing lots of software engineering, and working on assorted projects which might eventually see the light of day...

Niall Boyce lives and works in London. His stories have appeared in numerous online and print magazines including *Dark Horizons*, *Litro*, and *Smoke: A London Peculiar*.

Mark Clapham was born and raised in Yorkshire, studied and worked in London for over a decade, and is now based in Exeter, Devon. Any further moves south and he'll be living on a raft in the English Channel. Mark has written prose and scripts for characters including Doctor Who, Bernice Summerfield and Iris Wildthyme, as well as comic scripts for indie publisher Accent UK. He currently reviews for Game People (<http://www.gamepeople.co.uk/markclapham.htm>), is Content Editor for Shiny Shelf (<http://www.shinyshelf.com>) and blogs at the modestly-named <http://www.markclapham.com>. He lives in a very old cottage on a very busy road with his wife, writer Mags L Halliday, and their daughter Georgina.

Richard Dinnick writes audio dramas, novels and short stories for SF franchises such as *Doctor Who*, *Stargate* and *Sapphire and Steel*. He also writes non-fiction and is a journalist who has worked on many magazines as well as on Fleet Street. He has just finished his first fantasy novel about the world of dreams and nightmares. See www.richarddinnick.com for more.

John Dorney has written plays for the Royal Court, Soho Theatre and Hampstead Theatre, plus comedy for Radio 4. His Big Finish work includes the plays *Sapphire and Steel: Remember Me*, the *Doctor Who* stories *Echoes of Grey*, *Solitaire* and *Special Features*, and the Bernice Summerfield audio *Dead Man's Switch* he co-wrote with Richard Dinnick. This is his second short story, though his first, *Lepidoptery for Beginners* in *Doctor Who: Defining Patterns* is no longer in print.

Simon Guerrier used to be the producer of Benny's adventures. He has written novels, short stories, comic strips and audio plays for *Doctor Who*, *Being Human*, *Primeval*, *Robin Hood*, *Blake's 7* and *Sapphire and Steel*. He lives in London with a bright wife and a dim cat.

LM Myles lives in a remote part of Scotland where there are occasional sightings of wild haggis roaming the glens. She's recently had an essay published in *Chicks Dig Time Lords*, and is currently enjoying a nice cup of tea.

Kate Orman has written or co-written thirteen *Doctor Who* novels, many of them with her husband Jonathan Blum. As well as penning numerous *Doctor Who* and *Bernice Summerfield* short stories for Big Finish, she has published fiction in *Torchwood magazine*, *Interzone*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and several anthologies of original SF. Jon and Kate live in Sydney with their two cats.

Lance Parkin is the author of Benny tales *Just War*, *The Dying Days*, *The Extinction Event*, *The Big Hunt* and *Benny's Tale* in *The Company of Friends*. He co-wrote *Beige Planet Mars* and *Venus Mantrap* with Mark Clapham. Lance also wrote *The Emmerdale Story*, which features photography by Lisa Bowerman, who plays Benny in a series of audio adventures also from Big Finish, a variety of short stories featuring Benny and a History, a fictional timeline which includes many adventures featuring Bernice Summerfield. He has also written an original sort-of-SF, non-Benny novel, *Fixing Jesus*.

Eddie Robson is another former producer of *Bernice Summerfield*. He has written numerous audio plays, comic strips and short stories set in the world of *Doctor Who*, and material for comedy shows including *That Mitchell And Webb Sound*, *Look Away Now*, *Recorded For Training Purposes* and *Newsjack*. His other books include *Film Noir*, *Coen Brothers* and an illustrated children's version of *Dracula*. He lives in Lancaster with his wife and two boys.

Jim Smith has written adventures for Bernice Summerfield and Iris Wildthyme, comedy for Mitchell & Webb and books about Quentin

Tarantino, *Sex and the City* and half a dozen other film and TV subjects. He researches and writes production commentaries for BBC *Doctor Who* DVDs and lives in London, where he piles tax-deductible receipts into a drawer and drinks coffee.

Oli Smith is a freelance writer living in London. He has written comics and prose as well as a few non-fiction works, mostly for *Doctor Who* – including the recently-released novel *Nuclear Time* and audiobook *The Runaway Train*.

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Table of Contents

Prelude
Winging It
Don't Do Something, Just Sit There
Six Impossible Things
Interlude
The War of Art
The Better Part of Valour
Digital Dreams
Interlude
The Empire Variations
Past Caring
The Propaganda War
In The Ledgers Of Madness
Interlude
Excalibur of Mars
The End Times
Epilogue
About the Authors